

# **Political accountability in practice:**

## **A conversation analytic study of ministerial accountability towards the Scottish parliamentary committees**

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## Declaration

I, Ileana Alexandra Ispas, declare that this thesis has been composed by me and that this is my own work, except as specified. I also declare that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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## Abstract

This study examines political accountability within the context of ministerial accountability towards the Scottish parliamentary committees. A review of the existing literature on accountability identified striking discrepancies between different disciplinary perspectives. In particular, political science research (e.g. Mayer, 1999) focuses on describing the structural mechanisms available for constraining the behaviour of those being made accountable. This literature includes research on ministerial accountability (e.g. Flinders, 1991), although largely focusing on accountability towards the parliamentary Chamber rather than the committees. By contrast, the psychological literature does not focus on accountability, but rather on developing a classification of accounts (e.g. Scott and Lyman, 1968) doing the kind of work that is examined in political science under ‘accountability’ (i.e. providing excuses and justifications to explain problematic behaviours), and testing these accounts using experimental designs (e.g. Weiner *et al.*, 1987). However, given its focus on classification and experimental designs, the psychological literature on accounts treats language as reified and abstract. A third (discourse and conversation analytic) research tradition uses recordings of real-life verbal interactions to examine the turn-by-turn unfolding of interactions (e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979), but few studies focus on accountability, and none specifically investigate political accountability. My study is the first to bridge the gap between these three disciplinary perspectives by examining the practice of political accountability through the turn-by-turn unfolding of interactions between ministers and members of Scottish parliamentary committees. The thesis aims to contribute to an understanding of democracy in action by providing an insight into the practical ways in which accountability is accomplished within this specific real-life setting.

The corpus of data was compiled from 27 hours of video recordings of interactions between ministers and members of four Scottish parliamentary committees. I analysed the data using conversation analysis (CA). Use of CA led me to identify indirectness as a pervading characteristic of the ways in which challenges are formulated and attended to in the interactions between committee members and ministers, as well as a number of ways in which committee members and ministers

attended to matters of stake and interest in relation to such challenges. In addition, CA has allowed an insight into the limits of accountability by showing how ministers can avoid answering particular questions. These findings stand in stark contrast to the political science literature, which emphasises the adversarial nature of interactions within parliamentary settings and the availability of mechanisms for holding ministers to account (e.g. parliamentary committees) without investigating the way in which these mechanisms are used in practice. Furthermore, these findings contribute to the psychological literature on accounts by investigating their use within a real-life setting, and to the discourse and conversation analytic literature by showing the way in which well-known conversational devices (e.g. footing) are adapted to suit the specific context of parliamentary committee meetings with ministers.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

In this thesis I examine the practice of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees from a social psychological perspective. To do so, I use the context of the Scottish Parliament. Ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees is central to the system of ‘checks and balances’ (the separation of the legislative, executive and judicial branches of the Government) and to democracy in general (Behn, 2001; Flinders, 2001; Philp, 2009). The process of ministerial accountability prevents ministers from abusing their power by making them accountable towards Parliament through its committees (Flinders, 2001). Gaining an understanding of the practical aspects of ministerial accountability is therefore crucial to sustaining and improving the democratic system, and the Scottish Parliament provides an excellent case study for this.

In order to examine the practical aspects of ministerial accountability, I adopt a social psychological perspective and focus on the verbal interactions between committee members and ministers. Verbal interactions appear to be the prime site for the elicitation and formulation of accounts across a variety of contexts (e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Drew, 1984). I have mainly focused on accounts relating to interactionally problematic issues (e.g. not taking action, not answering questions), as this focus allowed me to gain a better understanding of the way in which accounts are attended to throughout interactions between committee members and ministers. In examining these accounts, I have focused both on the verbal strategies used by committee members to hold ministers accountable, as well as on the ways in which ministers attempt to undermine the challenging aspects of such attempts.

In order to analyse the practical aspects of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees I use conversation analysis (henceforth referred to as CA), a form of analysis that has not been used in the study of ministerial accountability but that has provided a large number of insights in social psychological and other studies of accounts in institutional settings. My PhD study leads to innovative insights that

have both theoretical and methodological implications for researchers, as well as practical implications for those involved in the political arena.

In this introductory chapter, I outline why understanding the practice of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees is important (section 1.1) and describe the features of the Scottish parliamentary committees that are relevant to the present study (section 1.2). I also provide an overview of the chapters in this thesis (section 1.3).

## **1.1 Ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees**

Accountability is commonly defined as ‘a relationship between two bodies, one of whom has the availability of sanctions against the other’ (Mayer, 1999, p. 113). Although this definition can be treated as encompassing both formal and informal aspects of the relationship, the existing (mainly political science) literature has exclusively focused on formal aspects, such as mechanisms of accountability (Marshaw, 2006) and institutional design (Mayer, 1999).

Two important aspects remain unexplored in the study of accountability. While focusing on formal mechanisms, the current literature does not address the issue of how accountability is actually ‘accomplished’ in practice, for example how issues are worked up as accountable during interactions between speakers. Furthermore, the existing literature only focuses on those formally asked to account for their actions. However, CA research carried out within other institutional contexts suggests that the elicitation of accounts is itself attended to by speakers as an accountable activity. My doctoral research on ministerial accountability towards the Scottish parliamentary committees seems particularly well placed to address these unexplored issues, for three main reasons.

To begin with, my study is the first to examine the practical aspects of ministerial accountability by focusing on talk-in-interaction. This contrasts with the existing literature’s exclusive focus on the structural aspects of accountability and can therefore provide a valuable contribution to existing research.

Second, my study adopts a social psychological perspective, thereby providing a fresh theoretical and methodological approach to an area traditionally grounded within political science. As I will show in the literature review, the focus on accounts within social psychology provides a useful contribution to the political science notion of accountability.

Third, my study uses data gathered directly from committee meetings where ministers are invited to give evidence, rather than participant recollections of meetings or *a priori* assumptions, as done by previous research (see chapter 2 for details). This access to real-life interactions allows me to examine the way in which issues of accountability are negotiated through the questions and answers exchanged between committee members and ministers. In particular, I examine the way in which committee members use questions to accomplish accountability in addressing ministers (chapter 4), and how ministers' answers resist or undermine the potential challenges they are confronted with (chapters 5, 6, and 7).

Fourth, my study uses the qualitative methodology of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1995). Characteristics of this particular qualitative method of analysis include a commitment to basing analytic claims on participants' displayed understanding and concerns, rather than on pre-conceived analytic ideas and concepts. As I will explain in chapter 3, CA is a particularly appropriate tool for gaining insight into the situated, interactional management of accounts.

Having explained the main aims and characteristics of my doctoral research, I will now provide a brief overview of the features of the Scottish parliamentary committee context that are relevant to the present study.

## **1.2 Features of the Scottish parliamentary committee context**

The Scottish Parliament is a democratically elected body comprising of 129 members known as Members of the Scottish Parliament (henceforth MSPs). The original Parliament of Scotland existed from the early 13th century until the Kingdom of Scotland merged with the Kingdom of England under the Acts of Union 1707 to form the Kingdom of Great Britain. As a consequence, the Parliament of Scotland merged with the Parliament of England to form the Parliament of Great

Britain, located at Westminster in London, where responsibility for Scottish affairs was located until May 1999. Following a referendum in 1979, in which the Scottish people gave their consent, the current Parliament was established by the Scotland Act 1978, which sets out its powers as a devolved legislature. The Scotland Act specifies powers that are 'reserved' to the Parliament of the United Kingdom. These are issues that the Scottish Parliament is unable to legislate on. All matters that are not explicitly reserved are known as 'devolved matters' and are automatically the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament. Such matters include agriculture, fisheries and forestry, economic development, education, environment, justice, food standards, health, home affairs, police and fire services, local government, sport and the arts, transport, training, tourism, research and statistics and social work. The first meeting of the new Parliament took place in May 1999.

Much of the work of the Scottish Parliament is done through its committees. Each committee comprises a small number of MSPs (typically 6-10 members), with the membership reflecting the balance of parties across Parliament. Every committee must have a convener and a deputy convener (to stand in for the convener when necessary) chosen from amongst the MSPs, and the choice of convenors also reflects the balance of parties. The convener's duties are to chair the meetings of the committees, to facilitate debate and to allow the committee to reach a consensus view, whilst acknowledging that there will be differences in the views of members. Convenors are not required to be impartial. As such, it is normal practice for convenors to participate in the committee meetings (e.g. asking questions of ministers) in addition to their duties in chairing the meeting.

The committees have the ability to initiate and redraft bills as well as to invite witnesses and demand government documents (including the role of monitoring pre-legislative consultation). According to the criteria set out by Mattson and Strom (1996), these are all indicators of high committee strength.

One of the most important roles of the Scottish parliamentary committees is to hold the Scottish Government to account. The Scottish Government was established in the same year as the new Scottish Parliament, and was initially called 'the Scottish Executive'. Following the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, the Scottish Executive was rebranded as the Scottish Government. Although its legal name remains the

‘Scottish Executive’, I will refer to it throughout the thesis as the Scottish Government, as the new name has been generally adopted by the opposition political parties and the media.

The Scottish Government has substantial influence over legislation in Scotland, putting forward the majority of successful Bills. The Scottish Government is led by the First Minister, who appoints ministers and assigns individual portfolios and remits to them. In using the term ‘minister’ throughout this thesis, I refer to both those ministers who are part of the Cabinet (recently retitled ‘Cabinet Secretaries’ by the new Administration), as well as to the Deputy-Ministers (recently retitled ‘Ministers’) who are not, as both types of ministers serve the same function in relation to accountability.

There have so far been three Scottish parliamentary elections: in May 1999; 2003; and 2007. As I started collecting data immediately following the May 2007 elections, my findings are based on the MSPs elected at the 2007 election. However, I will briefly discuss the previous two elections below to explain how my data collection period presents a particularly interesting case study.

In both the 1999 and the 2003 election, Scottish Labour emerged as the party with the highest number of seats, with the Scottish National Party following in second place. Furthermore, following both elections, Scottish Labour formed a coalition government with the Scottish Liberal Democratic party in order to gain a parliamentary majority. The governing Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition therefore had more MSPs on all committees than the opposition parties, a situation which was perceived as making it more difficult for members of the opposition parties to challenge the ministers (Arter, 2003).

The May 2007 elections (on which the current study is based) led to a number of important changes from the previous two elections. For the first time, the Scottish National Party (SNP) emerged as the party with the highest number of seats (47 seats), although having only one seat over the Scottish Labour Party (46 seats)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The remaining election results were: the Conservatives and the Liberal democrats each won 17 seats. However, the Conservative representation was reduced to 16 seats after the Conservative MSP Alex Fergusson was voted in as Presiding Officer (the figurehead of the Scottish Parliament), due to the strict political impartiality required for the role. The remaining three seats were won by the Scottish Green Party (2 seats) and the independent MSP Margo MacDonald.

Based on these election results, none of the parties gained an overall majority of seats in the Parliament. Furthermore, the SNP was unable to negotiate a coalition deal with any other of the parties, and was forced to establish a minority administration without a parliamentary majority.

The developments outlined above have led to an extremely interesting context in which to undertake the current study, as the ministers have to account to parliamentary committees where the majority of members are from opposition parties and are therefore likely to be confronted with tougher challenges and criticisms.

In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the thesis.

### **1.3 Overview of the thesis**

Throughout the thesis, I adopt a social psychological perspective to examine the practice of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees within the context of the Scottish Parliament. In chapter 2, I review the relevant literature. I begin by outlining existing research in political science relating to two areas: ministerial accountability and parliamentary committees. As I will show, political science research within both these areas emphasises the adversarial nature of interactions arising from party political interests within parliamentary settings, but provides little empirical evidence in this regard. I subsequently examine social psychological literature relating to these areas, and discuss ways in which a social psychological approach would be fruitful. In particular, I consider the way in which work on groupthink (Janis, 1972) within the context of committee decision-making can be seen to highlight the importance of examining the practical aspects of the accountability process. Furthermore, I review the social psychological literature on accounts and discuss its relevance to the political science focus on accountability. I also discuss the way in which a discourse and conversational approach has been applied within social psychology and other areas to the study of accounts, and review some of the insights yielded by this approach. In the final section, I highlight the gaps in the existing literature relating to ministerial accountability, parliamentary committees, and accounts, and explain how my study will address these gaps. I also present the specific research questions that my study pursues.

In chapter 3, I discuss the methodology used for my study. I begin by explaining the process of data collection, ethical issues, and the specific context of the study. I subsequently outline the characteristics of CA, provide reasons why it is the most appropriate method for my study, and show ways in which it has been used to analyse accounts in institutional settings. I conclude with a discussion of the methodological issues related to this type of analysis, particularly my use of audio rather than video data, my focus on the sequential organisation of talk, and my broad definition of what constitutes a question.

In chapter 4, I begin my analysis by examining how committee members accomplish accountability through their questions. In particular, I examine the way in which committee members work up issues as accountable and challenge the minister, while at the same time attending to their own accountability. This analysis provides an initial insight into the practical aspects of doing accountability, which will be further investigated in the following chapters.

In chapter 5, I examine the way in which committee members accomplish challenges, and how ministers counter these. In particular, I pay close attention to the ways in which speakers attend to the interactional difficulties of formulating and responding to challenges.

In chapter 6, I examine how accountability for taking action is worked out in the interaction between committee members and ministers, and explore several strategies used by ministers to legitimate inaction. My approach differs from the existing literature, which has so far focused exclusively on the structural aspects of accountability. Instead, this chapter examines the micro-practices through which ministers are held to account for taking action, and their resistance to such attempts.

In chapter 7, I examine different ways in which ministers avoid answering committee members' questions. In addition, I examine a particular instance in which the minister is repeatedly pursued for an answer. This chapter problematises the current focus of the political science literature on identifying the available mechanisms of accountability by providing an empirical investigation into the difficulties involved in using such mechanisms despite their availability.

In chapter 8, I summarise the main findings of the study, evaluate the analysis, and explain the way in which I have addressed issues of the validity and

generalisability of findings. I also discuss the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study, as well as its practical implications for improving the democratic nature of our society.



## Chapter 2. Literature review

In this chapter I review the existing literature relevant to ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees. Although the study adopts a social psychological perspective, I begin by examining the political science literature on parliamentary committees and political accountability as this is the primary area where research on this particular area is located. While providing important insights into the current mechanisms of accountability, this literature does not offer any indication on how ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees is accomplished in practice. In particular, I highlight the absence of any work in this area related to the verbal interactions that make up the process of ministerial accountability in a practical sense.

I subsequently review the social psychological literature relevant to parliamentary committees and accountability, and consider the contributions a social psychological approach could make. I begin by reviewing a psychological study by Janis on the development of a phenomenon he called ‘groupthink’ which used the context of White House committee meetings. This study points to the importance of accountability for introducing the ‘devil’s advocate’ element he identified as central to good decision-making. I subsequently consider social psychological research relevant to accountability. I note that while not focusing directly on accountability, the psychological literature does provide a valuable contribution through its focus on accounts doing the kind of work that is examined in political science under ‘accountability’ (i.e. providing excuses and justifications to explain problematic behaviours). In particular, I review studies focusing on developing classifications of accounts (e.g. Scott and Lyman, 1968), and testing these using experimental designs (e.g. Weiner *et al.*, 1987).

A shortcoming of the psychological literature on accounts is its treatment of language as reified and abstract (Buttny, 1993). This shortcoming is compensated for by another research tradition represented within social psychology, which uses recordings of real-life verbal interactions to examine the turn-by-turn unfolding of

interactions (e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979). This (discourse and conversation analytic) research tradition offers a number of advantages for the present study. In particular, the focus on the turn-by-turn unfolding of interactions provides strong potential for analysing interactions between ministers and committee members. However, few studies within this area focus on accountability, and none specifically investigate political accountability.

In the final section, I identify several omissions in the literature. In particular, no study has so far investigated the practical aspects of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees, such as the exchange of questions and answers between committee members and ministers. As I will argue, my study on the way in which ministerial interaction is accomplished through questions and answers in the Scottish parliamentary committees addresses this gap. Furthermore, I will briefly discuss the type of methodology that would be appropriate for this study, and introduce the specific research questions the study will address.

## **2.1 Research on political settings**

### **2.1.1 Political science research on parliamentary committees**

Two themes emerge from the existing political science research on parliamentary committees: focus on the structure of parliamentary committees; and research on factors influencing the behaviour of parliamentary committee members. I will examine each of these in turn.

#### **2.1.1.1 Structural aspects of parliamentary committees**

A large part of the literature on parliamentary committees focuses on the recent responsibilities for accountability and legislation attributed to these committees in parliaments across the globe. According to Mattson and Strom (1996), ‘the committee stage’ has become a basic moment in the workings of parliaments, and parliamentary committees are used increasingly as the main mechanisms of ministerial accountability towards the Parliament. In examining these developments, particular attention has been paid to the way in which parliamentary committees in a

large number of parliaments have been made to replicate government departments. For example, a study carried out by Shaw (1998) found that on a global level, there is increasing use of specialised committees following particular departments over the course of an entire mandate rather than only on an *ad hoc* basis. This stable committee structure, adopted among others by the Scottish Parliament, allows committee members (and thereby Parliament as a whole) to investigate the work of ministers in-depth through increased specialisation (Woodhouse, 1994). This aspect of parliamentary committee structures therefore improves the extent to which ministers can be held accountable by parliamentary committees and therefore by Parliament.

Research on parliamentary committees has also focused on the structural features of these committees. This has largely been accomplished by comparing these structural features across different countries. The most widely cited studies in this area was carried out by Mattson and Strom (1996) and contains an analysis of parliamentary committees within 18 European parliaments. The study examined the role of committees in European legislatures by exploring their structure, procedures, and powers. The study described and compared several structural features of European parliamentary committees: types and tenure; numbers; size of committees; jurisdiction and their correspondence with ministerial departments; restrictions on multiple memberships; and subcommittees. Findings indicate that the structural characteristics of parliaments are related to the powers that committees have over the work of the Government. In particular, higher numbers of committees allow a greater degree of specialisation and in-depth scrutiny into the work specific government departments. However, despite highlighting the importance of parliamentary committees to ministerial accountability, the study does not address the practical aspects of interaction between committee members and ministers during parliamentary committee meetings.

#### 2.1.1.2 Factors influencing the behaviour of committee members

Another strand of studies examines the factors influencing committee members' behaviour in the context of parliamentary committee meetings. For the most part, studies in this area have applied rational choice theory as a way of

identifying these factors. For example, Mayhew (1974) suggests that based on rational choice theory, we can assume that committee members wish to be re-elected and that their behaviour within parliamentary committee meetings is influenced by that goal. Fenno (1973) also emphasises committee members' motivation to generate 'good policy' as an influencing factor.

Also based on rational choice theory, Damgaard (1998) aimed to examine the way in which political parties constrain the behaviour of their committee members. In pursuing this question, the study used survey data from 18 European countries, including the UK. The answers to the survey indicated that parties apply a range of incentives that strongly motivate committee members to adhere to their goals. These incentives include offering loyal party members seats on the most prestigious committees; appointing them as convenors of committees; offering them higher roles within the party hierarchy; and, in situations where the party is elected into government, offering them promotions to government posts. The study also found a range of sanctions that parties could apply. These include removing recalcitrant party members from committees; not reappointing them to particular committees in subsequent parliamentary sessions; and stripping them of responsibility roles within the party. According to Damgaard (1998), as committee work is important for advancement in the party hierarchy and for prospects of re-election, the existence of these incentives and sanctions constrains the behaviour of party members within parliamentary committee meetings.

The existing literature examining factors influencing the behaviour of committee members therefore shares an important characteristic with the work on the structural aspects of parliamentary committees. In particular, this literature does not empirically demonstrate the way in which party politics or other considerations are attended to in practice during parliamentary committee meetings.

### **2.1.2 Accountability within political settings**

Research within this area covers two themes: mechanisms of accountability; and the influence of party politics on ministerial accountability.

### 2.1.2.1 Mechanisms of accountability

The first strand I will examine within the political science research on accountability focuses on the way in which accountability is conducted by identifying the available accountability mechanisms. In examining accountability in governance, Mashaw (2006) identifies six dimensions of accountability: who is accountable; to whom; for what; through what process; by what standards; and with what potential effects. While describing these different types of accountability, Mashaw (2006) does not include any reference to real-life interactions between the individuals involved in the process.

Bergsteiner and Avery (2008) propose the use of a matrix to depict potential accountability relationships and their nature and functions. The authors identify four steps in building this matrix. The first step is to decide the level of analysis, for example within a particular organisation (e.g. within government), or between different organisations (e.g. between government and parliament). The second step consists of listing all the actors/entities that could be involved in an accountability relationship with the chosen entity in meeting its responsibilities at the level of analysis identified in the first step. These could be the electorate, the Government, the union etc. The third step consists of generating the matrix using N (actors as potential accountees) x N (actors as potential accountors), while the fourth step is to identify for each cell whether there is an accountability relationship, and whether this relationship is mutual (the two entities account to each other) or unidirectional (only one of the entities accounts to the other).

A study by Mayer (1999) takes a more context-based approach than Bergsteiner and Avery (2008) by exploring the accountability lines applied to the Housing Corporation. The Housing Corporation is a quango tasked with paying grants to registered social landlords to build homes at sub-market rent costs, to regulate these landlords, and to facilitate their proper performance. The author focuses on describing the different mechanisms available for making the Housing Corporation accountable, as well as the particular role of each mechanism in generating accountability. For example, Mayer (1999) notes that the Housing Corporation is both externally as well as internally accountable (these concepts correspond to the intra- and interorganisational levels identified by Bergsteiner and Avery). Externally,

the Housing Corporation is accountable to a variety of stakeholders such as the Government, particularly The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR); The National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee; the Select Committee for the Environment; MPs; the Courts; and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration. Each of these stakeholders fulfils a particular role in making the Housing Corporation externally accountable. For example, every five years the Government commissions a wide-ranging review of the work conducted by the Housing Corporation, known as the Finance, Management and Policy Review (FMPR). This review is overseen by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and makes recommendations on the Housing Corporation's operating practices, which the Housing Corporation is required to implement. The DETR also has the right to close down the Housing Corporation, should this become necessary. A further way in which the Housing Corporation is accountable to the Government is through having to conform to the Government's accounting rules and other government-wide codes of practice. These codes include the Code of Best Practice for Board members; the Code of Practice on Access to Housing Corporation Information; and the Housing Corporation's staff rules and procedures for handling complaints.

Similarly to the larger area of research on political accountability, work on ministerial accountability is also primarily concerned with identifying accountability mechanisms and describing the way in which these function. For example, Flinders (2001) enumerates a range of ways in which ministers may be held accountable by Parliament, such as via parliamentary questions, departmental select committees, standing committees, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Public Accounts Committee.

An important characteristic of the existing literature on ministerial accountability is that it mainly addresses interactions between ministers and committee members in the main parliamentary Chamber, with only occasional references to ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees (e.g. Flinders, 2001; Norton, 1993). This suggests that the interactions within the parliamentary Chamber and the committees have so far been amalgamated by the existing literature despite the practical aspects of the interaction presenting sharp

differences. Furthermore, the main focus of research within the UK has been on the UK Parliament, at the detriment of work on ministerial accountability within the devolved administrations. However, the devolved administrations have a wide variety of powers. In Scotland, for example, the parliamentary committees have strong powers to make ministers accountable (Arter, 2002).

The studies reviewed above are typical of most of the political science work on political accountability, in focusing solely on identifying accountability mechanisms without examining the way in which these are taken up in practice. However, a study by Tsai (2007) conducted in rural China villages, where accountability mechanisms are weak or non-existent, constitutes a notable exception. The study, conducted between 1999 and 2002, used a combination of in-depth case study research and a survey of 316 villages in order to examine the reasons why in some villages officials provided their citizens with outstanding public goods and services, despite weak accountability mechanisms and the existence of many other villages where officials provided locals with nothing at all. By pursuing a research question related to the practical, day-to-day ways in which locals made officials accountable, the study by Tsai (2007) provides findings that go beyond mere description and can be used by locals in future efforts to improve their infrastructure. For example, the study found that the outstanding public goods and services were provided in circumstances where officials were made accountable through informal mechanisms, such as local solidarity groups (e.g. village churches, temples, lineage groups). Although the study did not examine the actual interactions taking place between members of these solidarity groups and government officials, the findings point to the value of not solely focusing on identifying accountability mechanisms, but also on the way in which these are used in practice.

#### 2.1.2.2 Accountability as a source of adversariality

In identifying available accountability mechanisms, some authors (e.g. Flinders, 2001; Turpin, 1989) have made the distinction between formal and informal mechanisms. The term 'formal mechanisms' relates to those that are official and recorded. For example, in the case of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees, the interactions between committee members and

ministers are recorded both in written form, in the 'Official Report', as well as in video form, both of which are publicly accessible and remain public property. By contrast, interactions arising through informal mechanisms of accountability are not recorded, and therefore not publicly accessible.

A number of authors (Flinders, 2001; Judge, 1983; Turpin, 1989) have suggested that formal parliamentary mechanisms of accountability such as parliamentary committees are negatively affected by the party political nature of the Parliament. This concern is based on the assumption that the party political nature of the Parliament leads to party politically biased questions and answers. According to this argument, party politics undermines the impartiality of committee members when taking evidence from ministers, and ministers' willingness to acknowledge aspects of their work that could lead to culpability and blame. Therefore, the questions and answers exchanged between ministers and committee members are described as biased, due to the fact that all those involved in the process are also strongly motivated by party leaders to show bias against the ruling party. In particular, ministers are seen as defensive in accounting for their actions, as they know that the information that they provide will ultimately be used to attack them (Flinders, 2001; Judge, 1983). Flinders (2001) also suggests that ministers and officials are more willing to provide more extensive information in the context of informal meetings, where their answers are not formally recorded and therefore cannot be used against them, than in response to formal mechanisms of accountability such as parliamentary committee meetings.

Some empirical evidence on adversariality within parliamentary settings (but not the parliamentary committees) comes from research by Harris (2001) on adversariality during PM Question time, using 12 recorded and transcribed sessions. In support of the adversariality documented by political science authors, the study found an abundance of utterances that can be classed as adversarial, for example that the Prime Minister refuses to answer questions, or that he has signed away the country's legal rights. Moreover, these utterances also contain adversarial choices of words in relation to the Prime Minister, such as 'dodging questions', 'pathetic', and 'absolutely worthless'.



Another notable finding by Harris (2001) is that while the House of Commons debate rules explicitly prohibit certain verbal utterances, such as members accusing each other of lying, in practice such utterances were common, for example in exchanges between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Indeed, Harris (2001) notes that in practice such adversarial exchanges are not only permitted but also rewarded by the other members through laughing, jeering, and shouting. Based on this evidence, Harris (2001) characterises the interactions during PM Question time as ‘an adversarial and confrontational political process’ (p. 466) and continues to say that the ‘British House of Commons, while probably not unique, is very clearly based on adversarial discourse practices.’ (p. 466).

Nevertheless, Harris’ (2001) empirical investigation does not fully support the emphasis on adversariality placed by more descriptive work on parliamentary settings. In fact, another important finding of Harris’ (2001) study is that adversarial utterances co-exist with features that are normally associated with politeness. For example, speakers use the third person syntactic forms as a mode of address, and refer to titles rather than to names of members when referring to or addressing them. Members are also referred to as ‘Honourable (or Right Honourable) Gentleman/Lady (or Friend)’, and ministers are frequently referred to by their titles. While these practices are generally regarded as a mark of formality and respect in other context, in the case of PM Question time Harris (2001) notes that these features co-exist, sometimes in the same utterance or in the immediate proximity of previously noted adversarial utterances. As such, Harris suggests that this apparently contradictory combination of extreme formality and adversariality ‘can only be understood and interpreted in relationship to the institution of Parliament and the wider political context, including the televising of parliamentary debates.’ (p. 463).

### **2.1.3 Conclusions**

In the present section, I have reviewed existing research on parliamentary settings, parliamentary committees and political accountability. The existing work on parliamentary committees provides some important insights into the importance of parliamentary committees in holding ministers accountable, given their increasing importance over the past decades. The work on political accountability largely

focuses on identifying the existing accountability mechanisms (e.g. parliamentary committees, in the case of ministerial accountability), but not on the way in which these mechanisms are used in practice. However, I also reviewed findings based on an extensive study conducted in rural China villages (Tsai, 2007), where formal accountability mechanisms are weak. The findings point to the importance of examining the way in which accountability is accomplished in practice. Furthermore, research by Harris (2001) on adversarial practices during PM Question time demonstrates the value of empirically examining interactions in parliamentary settings to uncover their complexity, rather than relying on broad descriptions of the setting as is the case with much of the political science work on accountability.

In examining the existing research on both parliamentary committees and political accountability, I was struck by the absence of any work relating to the verbal interactions that take place within both these contexts, unlike the work on Harris (2001) on PM Question time in the parliamentary chamber. However, these are both contexts in which verbal interactions appear central to what is accomplished in practice. For example, the verbal interactions between ministers and committee members (particularly the questions and answers aspect of the interaction) are central to understanding the practical aspects of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees.

## **2.2 Social psychological research**

In this section, I consider the contributions that a social psychological approach can provide to the areas of committee work and accountability. To do so, I review the existing social psychological research relevant to these two areas.

### **2.2.1 Social psychological work on committees**

There is little research within psychology using committee meetings as a context. One notable exception is a study by Janis (1972), which examined a number of decisions taken by foreign-policy White House advisory committees between 1940 and 1970, as well as their eventual outcomes. In undertaking this analysis, Janis attempted to identify the circumstances that prevented such groups from making the

best possible decisions, and coined the term ‘groupthink’ to refer to this collection of circumstances. According to Janis (1982), groupthink occurs in groups where members seek consensus at the expense of realistically appraising alternatives. In particular, groupthink leads groups to disregard warnings that particular decisions are flawed, and to overestimate their power as a group. Furthermore, group members are implicitly or explicitly discouraged from expressing disagreement with the overall consensus. As a result of these factors, poor decision-making is prevalent in groups affected by groupthink.

Methodologically, Janis based his study almost exclusively on historical material such as diaries, memoirs and other types of eyewitness accounts by participants. This type of data only allows for a very broad ‘chart’ of the most important (in hindsight, and from committee members’ own perspective) verbal exchanges between them. Nevertheless, Janis’ study, carried out within a committee context, has important implications for the area of accountability. Janis suggests that the most important factor leading to groupthink is the cohesiveness of the group. In groups that have fallen prey to groupthink, members tend to be proud of being part of the group, and want to remain part of it at all costs. This research highlights the importance of the ‘devil’s advocate’ element of accountability, providing initial insights into the value of examining ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees.

### **2.2.2 Social psychological work on accounts**

Another way in which social psychology can provide novel insights to the political science literature is through its focus on accounts, i.e. claims about what is happening in a given case that prevented actors from doing what they ordinarily would (Morris, White, and Iltis, 1994). Therefore, these accounts do the kind of work that is examined in political science under ‘accountability’ (e.g. providing excuses and justifications to explain problematic behaviours). I will review two strands of social psychological work on accounts. The first strand consists of classificatory and experimental research on accounts; the second strand takes a discourse and conversation analytic approach to the study of accounts.

### 2.2.2.1 Classificatory and experimental work on accounts

Social psychological research on accounts initially started by classifying these into different types. The first paper was written by Scott and Lyman (1968), and distinguished between two types of accounts: ‘excuses’ and ‘justifications’. These two initial categories were revised in various forms by a number of authors across the years, for example Hewitt and Stokes (1975), Tedeschi and Reiss (1981), Semin and Manstead (1983), and Nichols (1990). In undertaking such revisions, some of these authors also added particular categories to the initial taxonomy. For example, Hewitt and Stokes (1975) added disclaimers<sup>2</sup>, and Tedeschi and Reiss (1981) provided a theoretical review of how ‘predicaments’ are managed.

Subsequent to the trend of classifying accounts, researchers turned to using experimental designs to test how effective different types of accounts are. These studies largely presented participants with information about an offence that would be manipulated one way or another, and asked them to rate how acceptable they found various exonerations given by offenders. A typical finding would be that this varied with the ‘moral worth of the offender, his penitence, his superior status relative to the demander, and the offensiveness of the violation’ (Blumstein *et al.*, 1974, p. 551). Hypothetical scenarios used in other studies ranged from late essays (Hale, 1987) to politicians’ corruption (Riordan *et al.*, 1983). Other studies used confederates to commit particular social breaches for which they would present an account, while researchers covertly monitored the behaviour of bystanders to evaluate the effectiveness of the account. For example, Langer *et al.*’s confederate (1978) prefaced a potentially impolite request to jump a photocopier queue with various justifications provided by researchers, one of which was deliberately chosen to be ‘meaningless’ based on researchers’ criteria. Along similar lines, Weiner *et al.* (1987, studies 3 and 4) had their confederate excuse themselves for turning up late for an experiment.

Studies such as those outlined above found that there are generally shared assumptions for what counts as a good account. In particular, according to findings by Weiner *et al.* (1987), accounts are more likely to be seen as effective when the cause of the event can be attributed to ‘external’ (rather than internal),

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<sup>2</sup> Devices used to repair a breach before it happens. Examples of such devices are hedges (‘I’m no expert’) and cognitive disclaimers (‘I know this sounds daft, but...’).

‘uncontrollable’ (rather than controllable), or ‘unstable’ (rather than stable) conditions. Furthermore, Gonzales *et al.* (1992) found that accounts are more likely to be accepted when the cause of the event was accidental, and least likely when intentional.

An important strand of research on accounts comes from attribution theory proponents. Attribution theory attempts to explain the mental and communicative processes involved in everyday explanations. This theory was initially proposed by Heider (1958), whose main focus was to find the circumstances under which a person is more likely to judge a behaviour’s cause as internal (e.g. a disposition or a characteristic of a person) or external (e.g. an environmental factor). This focus later led to research on the so-called ‘fundamental attribution error’ (Ross, 1977), the tendency to make more internal attributions than external attributions for others’ behaviours. For example, Stamp and Sabourin (1995) found that relationally abusive or aggressive men tend to attribute their violence to things that were external to them, such as a wife’s behaviour or jealousy.

Research on the fundamental attribution error, in turn, led to important findings for accountability. In particular, a study by Tetlock (1985) explored whether accountability, which he defined as pressures to justify one’s causal interpretations of behaviour to others, reduces or eliminates the fundamental attribution error. To do so, the study asked participants to read an essay that either supported or opposed affirmative action, and were told that the essay writer had either freely chosen or had been assigned the position they took in the essay. Participants either did not expect to justify their impressions of the essay writer, or expected to justify their impressions either before or after reading the essay. Interestingly, the study found that participants were significantly more sensitive to situational determinants of the essay writer’s behaviour when they felt accountable for their impressions prior to reading the essay. These findings suggest that accountability eliminated the fundamental attribution error by affecting how participants initially analysed information.

Another strand of attribution theory that is relevant to accounts comes from research on responsibility. For example, research by Badahdah and Alkhder (2006) found that people are more likely to feel sympathetic to a person with AIDS if that person is viewed as not responsible for his or her own plight (e.g. if AIDS was

contracted through blood transfusion) as opposed to intentional risky conduct (e.g. unprotected sex). Erina MacGeorge (2001) investigated the ways in which people offer social support to one another in times of crisis and found that when the crisis was attributed as more stable, more the affected person's responsibility, and more a results of the person's effort, it induced greater anger and reduced sympathy for the affected person's plight. Stewart, Keel & Schiavo (2006) examined attributions people gave for others who had been diagnosed with an eating disorder. The study found that compared to the attributions made about people without the eating disorder, in the case of anorexia nervosa participants blamed the affected person for their condition.

Attribution research has also had important implications for understanding the way in which accountability is viewed in the context of relationships. In particular, Cantos, Neidig and O'Leary (1993) found that spouses were more likely to blame their partners rather than themselves for domestic violence. Furthermore, a study by Sillars *et al* (2002) found that aggressive couples reveal divergent attributions in their beliefs about why they acted as they did and what accounts for their partner's behaviour. In particular, aggressive spouses were found to attribute less constructive engagement and more avoidance to their partner than they attributed to themselves.

Despite the fruitfulness of findings based on attribution theory, this area of research has been criticised by discourse and conversation analysis. According to Buttny (1993), the problem with both classificatory and experimental studies on accounts is the treatment of language as reified and abstract. Both classifications of accounts and the use of hypothetical vignettes of accounts assumes that we can take accounts out of the real-life and situated context in which they are used. Such studies therefore promote an idealised image of accounts. Conversely, experimental work focusing on the operationalisation of accounts as variables to be manipulated with the help of confederates sacrifices the complexity of the use of accounts in real-life.

Researchers working within the attribution theory area have themselves voiced their concerns over the uneasy relationship with language. Indeed, Abraham (1988), Hilton (1990), and Turnbull and Slugoski (1988) all critiqued presuppositions about language in attribution theory. In particular, Hilton (1990) proposes a conversational model of causal explanation. However, despite the first sentence stating that 'causal

explanation is first and foremost a form of social interaction' (p. 65), and arguing that causal explanation takes the form of conversation and is thus subject to the rules of conversation, the article itself does not present data from conversations.

Even in cases where attribution researchers have employed more naturalistic materials, either on their own or as a supplement to more traditional materials (e.g. Harvey et al., 1988; Fletcher et al., 1987), their presuppositions about language can be seen as problematic. For example, a study by Olson and Lloyd (2005) engaged in detailed interviews with a small sample of women who had experienced aggressive behaviours in their relationships. They found that a 'glaring pattern was how often the women explained that aggression was the only way to get their partners' attention or to get the men to listen or acknowledge the women' (p. 615). This work, however, also presupposes that language is an essentially descriptive medium, and fails to address the way in which it orients to action.

Potter and Edwards (1990) provided empirical evidence of the shortcomings of attribution theory research by comparing this approach with a discourse analytic alternative. In particular, they documented three shortcomings of attribution theory: (a) its asocial and unexplicated notion of information; (b) its realist view of linguistic description; (c) its constrained account of participants' activity. According to Potter and Edwards (1990), attribution theory is based on the basic assumption that vignettes and other 'stimulus material' embody information that leads participants to particular inferences. By treating the vignettes as straightforward representations of the world 'out there', however, attribution theorists treat language as mere description. In the next section, I will outline an alternative approach to language, which I feel is more appropriate for the present study.

#### 2.2.2.2 The discourse and conversation analytic approach to accounts

A different social psychological perspective on accounts was taken by researchers from the discourse and conversation analytic tradition. While having common roots with classificatory and experimental studies in the work of Scott and Lyman (1968), this perspective is strikingly different by taking an interest in accounts used in real-life interactions, rather than as abstractions that could be

classified, or as the independent variables of experimental manipulations. Furthermore, research taking this perspective emphasises the way in which accounts respond to the specific features of the interaction. For example, the ‘discourse action model’ put forward by Edwards and Potter (1990; 1992) suggests that accounts are means to particular ends, and they are specifically designed for achieving those ends. This model led to an interest in the discursive subtleties of accounting, e.g. where accounts are to be found in the sequence of interactions.

A number of empirical studies within the discourse and conversation analytic research tradition have focused precisely on the sequential positioning of accounts. For example, within courts of law, Atkinson and Drew (1979) found excuses and justifications following questions that do not directly accuse the witness. This reflects the witness’s recognition that counsel’s questions are leading to blame, and the witness’s desire to mitigate such blame. A further finding was that witnesses justify their part in events by descriptions of the scene (e.g. ‘we were under gunfire at the time’) instead of directly disagreeing with the negative implications of the preceding questions. As suggested by Atkinson and Drew (1979), this strategy is adopted by witnesses in order to avoid self-blame, while also avoiding the interactional difficulties of disagreeing with the information in the prior question by deflecting attention away from matters where blame could potentially be allocated. As such, the aim of witnesses’ accounts is to counter the presupposition of the prior question that the witness should and could have taken an alternative course of action.

Another important finding generated by the discourse and conversation analytic perspective on accounts is that not only those responding to potential accusations attend to their own accountability, but also those providing reports or engaging in debates. For example, MacMillan and Edwards (1998) used discourse analysis to examine a series of newspaper articles based on one particular issue (‘designer families’), focusing on the way in which the articles constructed the relationship between event reports, explanations, and the reporter’s own credibility and involvement. Supporting the ‘discourse action model’ (Edwards and Potter, 1990; 1992), the study found that the accounts offered by the articles focused on both the specific events reported on, as well as the reporters’ own responsibility for providing accurate information.



A study carried out in the conversation analytic tradition by Antaki *et al* (2008) investigated how accountability plays its part in academics' management of competing institutional and personal identities. The study used a typical CA analytic session, on the premise that such sessions are to be free from participants' own prejudices and prior interpretations in approaching the data. This characteristic provided an interesting context in which to examine the way in which participants dealt with such matters arising in the course of the session. Indeed, the study found that participants attended to their own accountability when breaking the rules of CA sessions and did not simply dismiss their transgressions.

Other CA studies have also found that the act of calling for an account from another can itself be face threatening to both interactants. Accounts may therefore be sought indirectly, for example through indirect questions (Atkinson and Drew, 1979) or appearing to notice a particular state of affairs (Antaki, 1994). Particularly strong empirical evidence also comes from a series of studies using data from broadcast news interviews. In examining interactions within such interviews, Clayman and Heritage (2002) found that interviewers often asked questions by using footing shifts, for example by constructing these questions as asked by a particular speaker rather themselves. Furthermore, Clayman and Heritage (2002) found that such shifts generally preceded challenging questions. This indicates that journalists were aware of the contentious nature of their questions and used footing shifts to attend to their own accountability in asking them.

Research carried out using CA has also identified a variety of devices that can help us make better sense of the way in which accounts are worked up. I will outline some of these devices below. One of the devices identified by CA research in the formulation of accounts is 'footing' (Goffman, 1979; 1981). The use of this device indicates the basis on which an account is offered, whether from the perspective of the originator or the perspective of the person reporting the story.

As remarked by Edwards and Potter (1995), footing plays a central part in accountability. The interactional work performed in reporting events, including attributional issues for speaker and audience, may be accomplished indirectly through the way in which reported events and attributional issues relating to them are handled. For example, in a study focusing on questioning strategies used by

interviewers, Clayman and Heritage (2002) analysed the way in which interviewers use distanced footing to attribute their more overtly challenging remarks to a third party. The study found that interviewers use distanced footing to draw on the distinction between animator and principal, and construct their points using the ostensibly neutral role of animator. Consider the following extract, taken from Clayman and Heritage (2002):

### **Example 1**

US ABC Nightline: 6 June 1985: Nuclear Waste

Interviewer (IR): Ted Koppel    Interviewee: James Steele

1.     IR: →You heard what Doctor Yalow said earlier in
2.                this broadcast she'll have an opportunity to
3.                express her own opinions again but she seems to
4.                feel that it is an eminently soluble problem,...

As can be seen in the above example, a controversial opinion that might otherwise be attributed to the interviewer is instead deflected towards a third party (Doctor Yalow), thereby making it appear as if the interviewer is simply reporting what the named third party is saying. The use of footing therefore allows the interviewer to attend to his own accountability by placing the focus on the controversial issue itself, rather than his interest in raising it.

Another device used in the formulation of accounts is 'extreme case formulations' (ECF). These are formulations which evoke the maximal or minimal properties of an event or action such as 'never', 'every time', 'everyone'. Pomerantz (1986) notes that when people are engaged in moral activities such as complaining, blaming and justifying, the use of these devices is common. In particular, speakers use ECFs to shift the explanation from the personal to the situational. As such, ECFs can be used to construct the rightness of the practice and undermine particular versions of reality. For example, Buttny (1993) notes how individuals in relationship therapy can display themselves as behaving like other people do, and thereby normalise their behaviour and forestall the inference that their behaviour towards their partner is blameworthy.

Contrast structures are also frequently used when producing accounts. For example, McKinlay and Dunnett (1998) note how a member of the National Rifle Association of America uses contrast structures to contrast members of the association with criminals and vigilantes. In so doing, members of the rifle association are portrayed in a favourable light as average, law-abiding citizens, and being a gun-owner is normalised. Smith (1978) has shown how contrast structures can also be used to establish deviance rather than normality. In her study of 'K is mentally ill', Smith (1978) shows how by presenting K's activities in contrast to an implied norm of behaviour, K's behaviour is established as anomalous, and as an instance of pathological behaviour. Consider the example below:

### **Example 2**

1. Angela: When asked casually to help in a friend's garden
  2. she went at it for hours, never stopping, barely looking up.
- (Smith, 1978, p. 28)

As Smith (1978) suggests, it would not be hard to recharacterise what is going on here as the actions of someone conscientiously and energetically doing their friend a favour. However, in the way in which Angela describes K's actions, there is a contrast between the 'casual' request and the degree of compliance. Angela's description thereby describes K's actions in a way that constructs them as obsessive.

Another device worth noting in the construction of accounts is the use of script formulations. These are descriptions that can be used to establish events or actions as routine or as exceptional. They do so by constructing such activities as an individual's enduring dispositions or characterising them as a product of some feature of the situation (Edwards, 1994; 1995; 1996). One function of script formulations is that they normalise practices or events and establish them as not requiring any special account. In the example below, taken from a marriage counselling session (Edwards, 1992), both partners respond to a question from the Counsellor about their marriage.

### Example 3

1. C: Wh:en (.) before you moved over here hhow was  
2. the marriage.  
3. (0.4)  
4. Connie: ↑O↓h. (0.2) I- (.) to me: all alo:ng, (.) right  
5. up to now, (0.2) my marriage was rock solid.  
6. (0.8) Rock solid. = We had arguments like  
7. everybody else had arguments, (0.4), buthh (0.2)  
8. to me there was no major problems. Y'know?  
9. That's (0.2) my way of thinking but (0.4)  
10. Jimmy's thinking is ve[ry very different.]  
11. Jimmy: [Well (1.0) ] Bein: (0.8)  
12. a jealous person, (0.8) u:m, (0.6) we go back- (. )  
13. back to: (0.6) when we started datin' (1.0) when we were  
14. dating first (0.8) well we met in this: particular pub.  
15. (1.0)>When we start'd datin' we was in there, << EV'ry  
16. single week> we'd fight. (0.2) We were at each other  
17. the who:le time.

Potter (1996) argues in relation to this data that one of the contentious issues in this session is about the nature of the problem with Connie and Jimmy's relationship. In turn, the nature of the problem is inextricably bound up with who is to blame for their current difficulties. Connie builds up a description of strong and enduring marital stability through using 'rock solid' to indicate that the marriage has been strong until their current relationship problems. Potter (1996) also notes that Connie constructs the 'arguments' as being of a routine kind, the sort of argument that everybody has. In Edwards' terms, the arguments are script-formulated. The description is rhetorically organised to undermine a potential alternative, such as that their arguments were endangering their relationship. Indeed, this alternative is put forward by Jimmy. His description of the marriage contrasts the version of the relationship as rock solid combined with routine arguments with a version stressing endemic and deep-seated conflict. This alternative version is established through the extreme case formulations '<EV'ry single week>' and 'the who:le time'. In addition, Jimmy replaces Connie's term 'argument' with the stronger, more negative term 'fight'. Jimmy thereby constructs the relationship as characterised by conflict. This script formulation directs attention away from other potential explanations for their problems, such as Jimmy's extramarital affair (referred to in an earlier interaction

during the counselling session), by focusing on the problematic aspects of the relationship itself.

In order to present accounts as disinterested or unmotivated, speakers can also use externalisation devices. One type of externalisation device is detailed narrative and perceptually graphic description which provide a sequential reliving of events, displayed thereby as coherent and believable (Potter, 1996). This device produces an impression of being there by sketching features, which although not substantial to the claim or argument, would have been apparent to someone who actually witnessed the event (Potter, 1996). Consider the example below:

#### Example 4

1. Jimmy: U:m (.) whe:n these people came in. (.) >It was:< (.)
2. John and Caroline. (1.0) And then they had- (.)
3. this other fella Dave. °With them as well.°
4. [...]
5. U:m. (1.2) He c- he came- (.) they all came in the pub anyway.
6. (1.0)Well (.) Connie sat beside (0.6) Caroline. And I sat
7. (further back). So you was (.) you was split between us.
8. They sat in- on the other side. (1.0) The only words Connie
9. spoke to me (1.0) for the rest of the eve:ning (0.8) was (.)
10. get another drink. ° Get another drink. °

As noted by Potter (1996) in relation to the above data, this description is full of specific references. One way in which the category ‘witness’ is established is to provide graphic, vivid descriptions. These are the sorts of descriptions that might be derived from a careful viewing of the scene, and they may have features that might seem hard to make up because of their specificity. For example, direct quotation is the kind of thing that only a witness can properly report. The use of direct quotation therefore constructs Jimmy as a witness who is reporting an actual event rather than inventing or speculating and, moreover, a witness who can report precise details.

Another externalising device is systematic vagueness (Edwards and Potter, 1992). Consider the example below, in which the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is being pressed by a television interviewer about whether she precipitated the resignation of her Chancellor.

### Example 5

- Interviewer: but you are not claiming that there was seen to be full agreement  
between yourself and the Chancellor are ↑you
- Thatcher: .hhh I am claiming that I fully backed up and supported the Chancellor  
(.) of course we discuss things >we discuss things in Cabinet we discuss  
things in the economic committee .hh we discuss things  
with many advisers<

(Edwards and Potter, 1992, p. 143)

As noted by Edwards and Potter (1992) in relation to the above data, Mrs. Thatcher does not use the interviewer's term 'agreement' (with its implied opposite, disagreement) but replaces it with the term 'discussion'. This is a term that can include disagreement, so it does not directly contradict the interviewer, but at the same time suggests a more constructive and cooperative process. '

Another externalising device is the use of idiomatic expressions, i.e. clichéd or proverbial expressions such as 'it takes two to tango' or 'between a rock and a hard place'. According to Drew and Holt (1989), such expressions are not sprinkled randomly through conversation. Rather, they tend to be used at specific junctures. For instance, one common situation in which they are used is where someone is complaining about something to a friend or relative, and that person is withholding support or agreement. This is illustrated in the following example, in which Ilene is complaining about the actions of a company:

### Example 6

1. Ilene: .hhh we've checked now on all the papers 'e has an' Moss'n
2. Comp'ny said they were sent through the post we have had
3. n:nothing from Moss'n Comp'ny through the post.
4. (0.3)
5. Ilene: Anyway. (.) Tha:t's th- uh you know you can't (.) argue ih it's like (.)
6. uh:[m
7. Shirley: [Well
8. (.)
9. Ilene: banging yer head against a brick wall.

(Drew and Holt, 1989, p. 508)

If Shirley had been supporting Ilene's complaint we would have expected her to express that support at various points in the interaction. However, her only interjection is 'well', which is typically an indication that some dispreferred or disaffiliative action is likely to be produced (Levinson, 1983; Nofsinger, 1991; Shiffrin, 1987). It is at this point that Ilene produces the idiomatic expression 'banging yer head against a brick wall'. Drew and Holt suggests that idiomatic expressions are not easy to challenge with specific facts or information. That means they are suited to situations where there is conflict, or at least lack of support. Drew and Holt (1988) also noticed that idioms tend to occur after recipients of complaints have declined the opportunity to affiliate with the complaint. This suggests a non-sympathetic response or reception by the recipient. Hence, Drew and Holt (1988) suggest that idioms are ways in which complainers seek affiliation.

Finally, active voicing is another type of externalising device that can be used in accounts. This device is often used to make claims factual (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Wooffitt, 1992). For example, it is frequently used when people produce accounts of extraordinary events as a way of constructing corroboration and consensus from others witnessing the event. In particular, Wooffitt's (1992) study of accounts of the paranormal focuses on the scepticism with which they are commonly greeted. Because of this scepticism, such accounts are likely to be designed to resist undermining. One of Wooffitt's observations is that when people produce accounts of extraordinary events they often include sections of quoted speech, which he calls active voicing. These are commonly marked out as such by shifts in intonation although they are not always explicitly named as such ('he said...'). Wooffitt identifies a number of specific uses of active voicing in establishing the facticity of some claim. The first is through providing corroboration, as in the example below.

### **Example 7**

1. And, well, what is even more fascinating about the story is,
2. that he's telling the experience to other people and they said
3. → 'Oh, that wasn't too strange an experience'
4. because they had heard it before from this particular hut.

(Wooffitt, 1992, p.158)

In the example above, active voicing works by showing that different people have had the same experience or seen the same thing. Here this is constructed by providing a quotation that supposedly comes from a group of witnesses. The active voicing confirms that there was something present in the situation that could also be experienced by other people. Moreover, it is not just the speaker's judgements that other people had experienced something from the hut – we have their own words to prove it. The voicing is plural: 'they said'. This makes it easy to hear it as reporting a general experience of a range of people. The non-specific plurals avoid any troubling difficulties with the account, such as how many people, where they asked independently etc. It allows the inferences that there are both wide consensus and independence; but the speaker has not actually or explicitly claimed that many people heard the sound. She is not accountable for others' inferences. Wooffitt's work on active voicing shows the broader significance of footing for formulating accounts. For example, active voicing is also frequently used in complaints in relation to what someone said, as a way of illustrating the blameworthy character of the reported conduct (Drew and Holt, 1988).

In addition to bringing to light the various building blocks that can be used to study accounts, CA studies have also provided insights into their sequential organisation by investigating the way in which accounts are formulated and negotiated in interaction. In doing so, CA studies draw attention to the reflexive nature of accounts and their action-potential. For instance, Pomerantz (1978) notes that blamings are often done in the turn after a turn in which a speaker reported an 'unhappy incident'. These reports of 'unhappy incidents' generally do not indicate what or who is responsible for the event. Pomerantz (1986) tentatively suggests that this sequential organisation may fulfil a function of enabling the person reporting the unhappy accident to avoid attributing blame to a co-participant who appears implicated in the event.

Research on preference structure also suggests that accounts are often used when providing a dispreferred answer, such as when refusing an invitation (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Accounts used in such circumstances usually cluster around the issue of ability (Drew, 1984). Take the following example:



### Example 8

1. Mark: We w're wondering if you wanted to come over Saturday, f'r dinner.
2. (0.4)
3. Jane: Well (.) .hh it'd be great but we promised Carol already.

In the example above, Jane accounts for her refusal by making reference to an earlier commitment. In doing so, Jane avoids the implication that the invitation is unwanted or unattractive. Furthermore, as it invokes new information (the commitment to Carol) it does not imply that the person giving the invitation is being unthinking. Since there is no way the inviter could know of this commitment, Mark cannot be accused of making an invitation which he knew would be turned down. Finally, the knowledge drawn on in the account is hard to dispute: the person inviting is unlikely to know about the recipient's future commitments. The account therefore accomplishes the refusal while avoiding as far as possible any negative or critical consequences (cf. Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

Most of the examples provided in this section come from research on mundane interaction. However, numerous CA studies have shown that the devices highlighted by these examples are also used within institutional settings, where the practices that are used in everyday conversation are refined and modified to fit the requirements of the situation. As the parliamentary committee context used for the present study constitutes one such institutional setting, in the next section I will discuss the use of CA in analysing accounts within such settings.

#### 2.2.2.3. CA research on accounts in institutional settings

Institutional forms of interaction can be seen as being more 'restricted' than those found in everyday conversation. Furthermore, a distinction has been drawn between two types of institutional settings: formal and informal (Heritage and Greatbach, 1991). In formal settings (news interviews, courtrooms, parliamentary meetings), participation is focused on particular tasks, the order of participation is fairly rigid, and the kinds of turns expected of participants is limited, and to an extent

pre-allocated (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Non-formal types of institutional settings (doctor surgeries, radio phone-in conversations, counselling sessions) are more loosely structured but still task-oriented (Drew and Heritage, 1992). As parliamentary committee meetings fall in the category of formal types of institutional settings, the following section will provide concrete examples of the type of insights the use of CA methodology has brought to research within this type of setting.

CA has provided important insights in the context of broadcast interviews and courtroom settings. In a similar way to the parliamentary committee context, within both these contexts interactions are mainly conducted through questions and answers. As such, CA studies investigating broadcast interviews and the courtroom examinations provide excellent examples for the use of CA within these types of settings.

I will begin by discussing CA research on broadcast interviews. Much research in media studies on this particular context has focused on establishing whether the news is biased or not. However, conversation analysts have taken a rather different approach, asking how an appearance of neutrality is managed in practice, especially given the emphasis placed in modern news programmes on asking tough questions and putting politicians and others on the spot. In particular, Clayman and Heritage (2002) have researched the way footing shifts are used in the achievement of neutrality. Their argument is that when interviewers confront an interviewee with a contentious description of some state of affairs, they tend to produce it as a quote from a particular speaker, or even treat it as what people in general have claimed. Clayman and Heritage (2002) suggest that confirmation about the role of footing in news interviews can be found by considering in detail the manner and placement of footing shifts. For example, footing shifts tend to appear when more contentious factual claims are made, or even when contentious words are used. In the following example, the relatively controversial fact that President Reagan won a big election victory is merely asserted as common knowledge. However, a controversial description suggesting that his programmes are in trouble is introduced with a footing shift:

### Example 9

1. IE: Senator, (0.5) uh: President Reagan's elected
2. thirteen months ago an enormous landslide.
3. (0.8)
4. It is s::aid that his programmes are in trouble...

(Clayman, 1992, p.169)

Whether a description is controversial or not is itself potentially a contentious issue over which there may be no consensus. Clayman and Heritage (2002) draw on the ethnomethodological notion of reflexivity to stress that the familiarity of this practice of footing shifts means that it serves, in part, to constitute the item as sensitive or controversial. A display of neutrality through shifting footing is therefore also an indication that the news interviewer is treating something as controversial or sensitive.

Another line of evidence that footing shifts are actively managed comes from the detail of the participants' practices of self-repair. For example, in the following extract the interviewer seems to be about to make a controversial assertion, but breaks off and changes footing.

### Example 10

1. IE: But isn't this- uh:: critics uh on thuh
2. conservative- side of thuh political argument
3. have argued that this is: abiding by thuh
4. treaty is: unilateral (.) observance (.)
5. uh:: or compliance (.) by thuh United States.

(Clayman, 1992, p. 171)

In the above example, the change of footing displays neutrality and avoids the possibility that the news interviewer will be treated as accountable for the contentious description of US policy.

As can be seen from the brief analysis above, the use of CA has provided important insights into how broadcast interviewers provide the appearance of

neutrality when asking challenging or controversial questions. The use of CA has also provided insights into the way in which witnesses called before the counsel in the context of courtroom interactions manage to stave off implications of blameworthiness for their actions. I will show this by discussing a study conducted by Atkinson and Drew (1979) on courtroom interactions between witnesses and the counsel. One of the study's most interesting findings concerns a particular feature of this context, namely the tendency for the counsel to build up to blamings and accusations over a number of turns. As suggested by Atkinson and Drew (1979), this feature leads to two kinds of defences put forward by witnesses, the first type being formulated before the counsel made any accusations, and the second after the accusation had been made. Despite their different positioning, both kinds of defence tend to orientate to the same objectives: first, to avoid allocating blame to oneself; second, to minimise disagreement with the information provided by the counsel in the prior question.

To illustrate these findings, I will discuss the analysis by Atkinson and Drew (1979) in relation to the Scarman Tribunal, where the blameworthy issue was the failure of officers to do certain things (arrest rioters, protect property). Atkinson and Drew (1979) identified two types of accounts for not taking action: before the accusation had been made, and after the accusation had been made.

In the first instance, the counsel's build-up to making the failure to act noticeable provides the witness with an opportunity to produce a defence before the accusation of failure to act is completed. The general form of these defences plays down the importance or severity of the events in question. The witness manages to imply that action against rioters was unnecessary, as can be seen in the next example:

### **Example 11**

1. C: You saw this newspaper shop being petrol bombed on
2. the front of Divis Street?
3. W: Yes
4. C: How many petrol bombs were thrown into it?
5. W: Only a couple. I felt that the window was already broken and that
6. there was part of it burning and this was a rekindling of the flames.

(Atkinson and Drew, 1979, p. 137)

The counsel has not yet asked the witness why he did nothing to stop the bombing, but this accusation is anticipated and the witness produces a description of the scene that minimises the need for action. Atkinson and Drew (1979) note the use of ‘only’ to qualify the number of petrol bombs used and the description suggesting that damage had already been done, with the implication it was not worth bothering about. The overall upshot of the defence is that there was no point in further action as nothing could be done to rescue the shop. In addition to giving an account that underplays the damage, these defences can deflect attention away from matters where blame could potentially be allocated. In this case, the witness concentrates on the issue of property, ignoring the issue of whether he should have tried to arrest the people throwing the petrol bombs. In this way, he attempts to select the ground from which to conduct the defence.

The second major type of defence occurs after the blaming has been completed, and involves a very different type of account. This second type of defence has two components: a rebuttal and an account, and these components were found to either be produced in a single turn or in separate turns. The following extract is, according to Atkinson and Drew (1979), a typical example of this kind of defence:

### **Example 12**

1. C: What did you do at that point?
2. W: I was not in a very good position to do anything. We were under
3. gunfire at the time.

(Atkinson and Drew, 1979)

As noted by Atkinson and Drew (1979), the rebuttal is the first part of the response to the counsel’s completed accusation. The aim is to counter the presupposition of the prior question that the witness should and could have done something (e.g. stopped the crowd throwing petrol bombs). The account does not, however, disagree with the presupposition that this action might have been relevant. The second part of the defensive response is the account, supplying an excuse for inaction. It supplants the idea that the witness did not want to do anything or was not trying to do anything by suggesting a powerful constraint such as being under gunfire.

As I have shown in this section, the use of CA in the analysis of accounts within institutional settings has provided important insights into the ways in which speakers orient their accounts to the contextual constraints provided by the specific setting. We can therefore be confident that using CA in the context of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees will provide equally important insights into the practical aspects of such interactions. In the next section, I discuss the way in which I used CA to analyse the data for the present study.

### **2.2.3 Conclusions**

I began this section by examining social psychological research conducted by Janis (1972) within the context of a particular set of committees, namely *ad hoc* White House committees during the Kennedy administration. Unlike the political science work, Janis' (1972) study only used committees as a context for examining the psychological phenomenon he termed 'groupthink', rather than as an object of study in themselves. Nevertheless, his research does highlight the important 'devil's advocate' role played by the practical aspects of accountability.

The psychological literature relevant to accountability focuses exclusively on 'accounts' rather than accountability. This different focus to the political science literature is helpful, for the purpose of the present study, in raising the question about what is actually done through accountability at the micro level, as opposed to the organisational mechanisms available. However, the first strand I reviewed, consisting of classificatory and experimental studies, filters talk through the researchers' operationalisations. This leads to a treatment of language as reified and abstract. The shortcomings of this research strand therefore point to the importance of examining the use of accounts in real-life situations.

The discourse and conversation analytic approach to accounts, on the other hand, provides a useful starting point for the present study through its focus on real-life interactions and its conceptualisation of accounts as designed to achieve particular goals. This approach can be successfully applied to the study of accounts used in accountability, as demonstrated by findings based on this approach carried out within a variety of different contexts. However, to my knowledge none of the studies examining accountability has addressed political accountability, or the even

more specific area of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees. Doing so would prove advantageous to the area of discourse and conversation analysis, for two reasons. Firstly, ministerial accountability is crucial to the upholding of democratic principles, and discourse and conversation analytic approaches can provide a valuable contribution to this and thereby further demonstrate their relevance to real-life contexts. Secondly, the interactions between ministers and members of parliamentary committees are public property and therefore publicly accessible. This presents the advantage of access to naturalistic data that does not require the intervention of the researcher.

## **2.3 Conclusions and exposition of lacunae in the literature**

The review of the existing literature on accountability identified striking discrepancies between different disciplinary perspectives. In particular, political science research (e.g. Mayer, 1999) focuses on describing the structural mechanisms available for constraining the behaviour of those being made accountable. This literature includes research on ministerial accountability (e.g. Flinders, 2001), although largely focusing on accountability towards the parliamentary Chamber rather than the committees. By contrast, the social psychological literature does not focus on accountability, but rather on accounts (e.g. Scott and Lyman, 1968) doing the kind of work that is examined in political science under ‘accountability’, i.e. providing excuses and justifications to explain problematic behaviours. A first strand of this literature examined accounts through classifications and experimental designs (e.g. Weiner *et al.*, 1987). This work is problematic due to its treatment of accounts as reified and abstract (Buttny, 1993), removing them from their real-life context. By contrast, the discourse and conversation analytic research tradition within social psychology uses recordings of real-life verbal interactions to examine the way in which accounts are used to achieve particular ends (e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979). This perspective appears to be the most promising for the present study, but studies within this area have not addressed political accountability or the more specific area of ministerial accountability.

The review of the literature therefore highlights a number of gaps, which my study addresses. First of all, no study has yet examined the practical aspects of ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees. My study addresses this gap by providing a fine-grained examination of some of the actions performed through questions and answers during interactions between committee members and ministers within the Scottish parliamentary context.

Second, the review of the literature on ministerial accountability opens up a range of empirical questions that my study addresses. In particular, the concern relating to the implications that the party political nature of parliament leads to adversariality and bias in asking questions suggests the need to examine the way in which issues of adversariality, interest, and stake, are managed by committee members when addressing ministers. Furthermore, the political science focus on identifying the available mechanisms of accountability raises the question of how questions asked by parliamentary committee members, as an accountability mechanism, are used in practice, and what their limitations are in relation to yielding answers from ministers.

Methodologically, pursuing the above questions requires the ability to capture the unfolding of verbal interactions between committee members and ministers. The method used for the present study therefore needs to be particularly well-suited to examining the turn-by-turn unfolding of the interaction between speakers, and to enable the analyst to draw conclusions based on speakers' own utterances. In chapter 3, I will discuss the ways in which the method of conversation analysis I have used in the present study fulfils these criteria.

## **Research questions**

In conclusion, my study addresses several lacunae in the literature by examining the practical aspects of ministerial accountability towards the Scottish parliamentary committees. Overall, my doctoral research aims to answer the following research question: How are parliamentary committees used as a mechanism for ministerial accountability in practice? I have split this broad research focus into three more specific research questions. In outlining these below, I explain the way in which these are addressed by the empirical chapters:



1. How do committee members accomplish accountability in their interactions with ministers? This question will initially be addressed in chapter 4, which will specifically focus on the way in which committee members' questions towards ministers accomplish accountability. Furthermore, this concern will also be addressed in chapters 5-7, by examining the interaction between committee members and ministers arising from matters of accountability raised through the questions.

2. How are challenges formulated by committee members and responded to by ministers? This question will be addressed in chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 5, I examine different ways in which committee members pose challenging questions to ministers and the strategies used by ministers to undermine the challenges. In chapter 6, I focus specifically on the way in which challenges in relation to taking action are played out in the interaction between committee members and ministers.

3. What are the limitations of parliamentary committee questions as a mechanism for ministerial accountability? I will focus on this issue in chapter 7, where I examine different ways in which ministers avoid answering questions asked by committee members, and also analyse an extended sequence where a minister is consistently pursued for an answer. Furthermore, this issue is also addressed in chapter 6, where I examine different ways in which ministers account for not taking action on issues they had made a previous commitment to.

As I have already indicated in the Introduction, I will pursue the above research questions through empirical research carried out within the context of the Scottish parliamentary committees. This context provides an excellent case for examining ministerial accountability towards parliamentary committees, for two important reasons.

Firstly, the Scottish parliamentary committees fulfil the criteria for high committee influence over ministerial work, according to the criteria set out by Mattson and Strom (1996). As such, ministerial accountability towards these committees is likely to be a matter of outmost concern for both committee members

and ministers, as committee members' evaluations of the ministers has strong implications for ministers' ability to take action.

Secondly, previous research relevant to parliamentary committees in the UK has so far only examined parliamentary committees in the UK Parliament. However, since its reopening in 1999, the Scottish Parliament in conjunction with the Scottish Government are responsible for a wide range of issues: Health, local government, housing, tourism, some transport, police and fire services, natural and built heritage, sports and the arts, education, social work, planning, economic development, courts and the legal system, environment, agriculture, forestry and fishing, public registers and records. As such, it is important that research begins to address interactions between the Scottish Parliament and Government. The present study addresses this issue by focusing specifically on the interaction between Scottish ministers and members of the Scottish parliament committees.

In the next chapter, I will describe the methodology used to pursue these questions.

# Chapter 3. Methodology

In the previous chapter I concluded my review of existing research relevant to the present study by specifying the study's research questions. These questions necessitate a research method that can capture the unfolding of verbal interactions between committee members and ministers. In the present chapter I will argue that conversation analysis (henceforth CA) fulfils these requirements.

Before outlining the above argument, I discuss the way the corpus of data was compiled, the process of data collection, and the way in which ethical issues were addressed (section 3.1). I subsequently outline the main features of CA (section 3.2), particularly its conceptualisation of utterances as social actions; its focus on the organisation of talk-in-interaction; and its understanding of the normative nature of talk-in-interaction. I also explain my choice of CA by comparing it against other related approaches and outline the advantages presented by CA for my doctoral research. I subsequently describe the way in which I have used CA in the process of analysis (section 3.3) and outline methodological issues arising from my approach (section 3.4), particularly my focus on the audio elements of the data, my focus on the sequential organisation of talk, and my conceptualisation of questions. I conclude the chapter (section 3.5) with a summary of the main arguments presented and an outline of the subsequent empirical chapters.

## 3.1 Data collection

### 3.1.1 Corpus of data

The corpus of data used for the present study consists of interactions between Members of the Scottish Parliament serving as committee members on Scottish parliamentary committees (henceforth 'committee members') and Scottish Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers (henceforth 'ministers'). I focused on interactions taking place exclusively within the context of Scottish parliamentary committee meetings, and gathered data from four committees: 'Economy, Energy and Tourism

Committee’ (henceforth EETC); ‘Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee’ (ELLCC); ‘European and External Relations Committee’ (EERC); and ‘Health and Sport Committee’ (HSC). I chose these committees because I wanted the data to cover a wide range of issues and debates within the Scottish Parliament.

The meetings included in the corpus of data were held between the 26<sup>th</sup> June 2007 (the date of the first interaction between committee members and ministers after the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2007 elections) and the 5<sup>th</sup> December 2007 (the start of the Christmas parliamentary recess<sup>3</sup>). During this period, there were 41 meetings across the four committees, of which 16 included interactions with ministers<sup>4</sup>. The 16 meetings represented approx. 27 hours of recording.

### **3.1.2 Data collection**

The data was collected in two stages. The first stage was to download the Official Report<sup>5</sup> from the website of the Scottish Parliament after each meeting, and to check whether any of the ministers was invited to the meetings. I also used the Official Report to gain an initial insight into the interactions between committee members and ministers during those meetings where ministers were invited. The second stage was to request the video recordings on DVD from the Scottish parliamentary broadcasting office.

### **3.1.3 Ethics**

I considered preserving the anonymity of the speakers (ministers and committee members) by using pseudonyms. However, I decided against doing so for two reasons. Firstly, as the data is in the public domain, complete anonymity could

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<sup>3</sup> Period during which the Parliament is not in session.

<sup>4</sup> Not all committee meetings invite ministers to account, so only those meetings that invited ministers were included in the corpus of data.

<sup>5</sup> The Official Report of committee meetings is the written record of everything that is said during the public part of the meetings. This report documents MSP’s words with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected. An Official Report for each meeting is made available on the Scottish Parliament website one week after the meeting has taken place.

not be preserved. Secondly, as most CA and other studies on broadcast interviews with politicians provide full details of the speakers (e.g. Clayman and Heritage, 2002), preserving the anonymity of speakers in the present study would deviate from the norm. The study conformed to the BPS and APA code of conduct, and I obtained ethical approval from the Psychology ethics committee at the University of Edinburgh before collecting the data.

## **3.2 Data analysis: Conversation Analysis (CA)**

I have carried out the data analysis for the present study using CA, a method that can be defined as the study of talk in interaction. This method grew out of ethnomethodological research, and concentrates on the turn-by-turn interaction between speakers (Heritage, 1984). In contrast to other related methodological approaches (discussed in section 3.2.4), the main aim of CA is to examine how peoples' own interpretations of ongoing talk inform their subsequent contributions to the unfolding of the interaction. This interest in people's own understandings of what is happening during the interaction has important implications for the way in which CA is done. In particular, analytic claims about the particular function of an utterance, and the way in which others receive it, can and should be based on participants' own use and interpretation of those utterances. To explain this in more detail I have focused on three main features of CA: its conceptualisation of utterances as situated social actions; its focus on the sequential organisation of talk; and its emphasis on the normative nature of talk in interaction.

### **3.2.1 Utterances as social actions**

The first characteristic of CA is that it treats utterances as activities people use to accomplish particular goals in their interaction with others (Wooffitt, 2005). From a CA perspective, utterances are not simply transmitters of information between speakers, but also a means through which speakers accomplish a series of actions such as accounting, blaming, persuading etc. Speakers make particular features of the world around them relevant to the interaction while discarding others. In doing so, speakers collaboratively and continuously re-construct the world around them in

ways that are consistent with the particular activities they are working to accomplish. CA therefore treats language as an activity, rather than as a medium for transmitting information.

CA also treats talk in interaction as an object of analysis in its own right, rather than a medium through which we can investigate other social processes such as individual personalities or cultural constraints (Heritage, 2001; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). Related to this is CA's concern for the indexical and the reflexive nature of social actions, both of which I will discuss below.

The term 'indexical' refers to the way that the meaning of utterances is dependent on the specific micro-context of the interaction in which they are used (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). One of the central claims of CA is that the vast majority of expressions used are indexical. Consider the following example:

### **Example 1**

A: I have a fourteen-year-old-son.

B: Well that's alright.

A: I also have a dog.

B: Oh I'm sorry.

(from Sacks, 1995, p. 757)

In the example above, B's second turn appears initially surprising. However, this is a real interaction taken from a conversation in which the would-be tenant of an apartment (A) is describing circumstances to the landlord (B) that might lead to being disqualified from renting the flat. In this specific context, B's second utterance refers to A being disqualified from taking up the lease. As this example illustrates, listeners 'fill in' the meaning of utterances with the aid of information about who the speaker is, what their status is, what they have said previously, what is likely to happen next etc. Speakers are constantly interpreting the meaning of utterances using their knowledge of the micro-context.

Related to indexicality, the term 'reflexive' relates to talk not only being *about* actions, events and situations, but also partly *constituting* these through the way in which actions, events and situations are described and responded to (Garfinkel, 1967;

Pollner, 1991; Potter, 1996; Wieder, 1974). Consider the different ways in which B responds to A's utterance in the following two examples, taken from Antaki (2000):

### **Example 2**

A: The washing up needs to be done soon

B: I'm sorry, I was going to do it earlier

### **Example 3**

A: The washing up needs to be done soon

B: Okay, I'll do it.

In example 2, B responds to A's statement with an apology: 'I'm sorry', thereby constructing A's statement as a complaint. In example 3 on the other hand, B's response 'Okay, I'll do it' establishes A's utterance as a request. A's utterance therefore takes on a different meaning depending on the way in which B attends to it.

The notions of indexicality and reflexivity are closely connected. Speakers construct the meaning of utterances on a turn-by-turn basis, and the way in which they interpret each preceding turn can be found in the way in which they attend to it. We can therefore examine the way in which speakers attend to the unfolding of interactions by examining their turn-by-turn utterances (Heritage, 1984).

## **3.2.2 Focus on the organisation of talk-in-interaction**

A second feature of CA is that it aims to identify patterns in the unfolding of interactions. As I explained in section 3.2.1 in relation to indexicality and reflexivity, speakers construct the sense of utterances on a turn-by-turn basis. This feature of talk enables us to study the underlying organisation of this turn-by-turn unfolding of the interaction (Wooffitt, 2005). In particular, the way in which speakers orient towards each other allows us to examine the patterns in the interaction, such as sequences of action or the function of specific words in relation to others. On the basis of examining these patterns of interaction, we can develop analytic accounts focusing on the regularities observable in the interaction (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998).

Analytic claims about the organisation of the interaction can therefore be derived from an inspection of the activities accomplished by the participants

themselves (Sacks *et al.*, 1974). In particular, contextual features related to the sequential placing of utterances have an important role to play in analysis. In designing their turns, participants orient to the preceding turn. The preceding turn thereby becomes an important aspect of the context of the interaction. This preceding turn sets up the normative expectation that some next action is performed by the speaker taking the next turn, which (re)creates a context for the next speaker. By producing a next turn, participants demonstrate an understanding of the previous action (Heritage, 1997). As participants orient to what they understand to be the salient features of the relevant micro- and macro-context, they allow us to examine the way contextual features influence the unfolding of the interaction (Wooffitt, 2005). As a result, CA does not necessitate ethnographic characterisations of the setting and its participants in the analysis (Schegloff, 1991; 1997; but see Moerman, 1988). Instead, CA relies on the action-related context of prior turns to draw conclusions about the actions being accomplished by utterances.

CA is therefore simultaneously context-sensitive and context-free (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). It is context-sensitive in the sense that participants design their turns based on previous turns in the interaction, and also make relevant what they understand to be the salient features of the macro-context (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). CA is at the same time context-free in the sense that the techniques used by participants to get things done are not tied to the local circumstances of that specific occasion. Rather, we find the same kinds of techniques are used by different participants in different circumstances (Sacks *et al.*, 1974). The purpose of ‘generalisation’ therefore becomes whether and how some *a priori* rule or principle is oriented to by participants in various instances of interaction (Coulter, 1983).

The transcription system used in CA is designed to reveal patterns in the organisation of talk (ten Have, 1999). To do so, CA uses naturally occurring data taken from concrete interactions, in contrast to other analytic methods using abstract theories or concepts. CA’s recommendation for making recordings is that these should catch ‘natural interaction’ as fully and faithfully as practically possible, not co-produced or provoked by the researcher (ten Have, 1999). CA transcripts capture a range of details missed by more conventional transcripts such as intakes of breath, ‘ers’, ums, and their variations. These kinds of minor contributions and non-lexical



items have been found to be interactionally significant (e.g. Jefferson, 1984). Even a minimal turn consisting of only one word can signal the speaker's understanding of the ongoing interaction, and thereby facilitate or constrain the range of possible next turns other speakers may produce. For example, non-lexical items such as 'um' etc. indicate that the current turn is ongoing, thus establishing continued speakership rights (Jefferson, 1984; Schegloff, 1981).

### **3.2.3 The normative nature of talk-in-interaction**

A third feature of CA is its focus on identifying the normative expectations that underpins talk-in-interaction. This focus is based on the assumption that interaction partners rely on shared, taken for granted expectations and methods of inference in the production of talk. As Garfinkel (1963, p. 221) suggested, in any two-party conversation 'much that is being talked about is not mentioned, although each expects that the adequate sense of the matter being talked about is settled'.

This assumption is supported by numerous strands of evidence. One strand of evidence comes from ethnomethodology (which preceded and strongly informed CA), through the so-called 'breaching experiments' reported by Garfinkel (1963; 1967). Through these experiments, Garfinkel examined the normative nature of ordinary interaction by disrupting some of its fundamental rules. Garfinkel accomplished this by instructing experimenters to 'engage an acquaintance or a friend in an ordinary conversation and, without indicating that what the experimenter was saying was in any way out of the ordinary, to insist that the person clarify the sense of his commonplace remarks' (Garfinkel, 1963, p. 221). Here are two examples of Garfinkel's 'breaching experiments':

('S' is the unknowing participant, 'E' is the experimenter)

#### **Example 4**

S: I had a flat tire.

E: What do you mean, you had a flat tire?

(S appears momentarily stunned. Then answers in hostile way.)

S: What do you mean? A flat tire is a flat tire. That is what I mean.

Nothing special. What a crazy question!

### Example 5

S: How are you?

E: How am I in regard to what? My health, my finance, my school work, my peace of mind, my...

S: (Red in the face and suddenly out of control.) Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are.

In each of the above cases, the participants had expected that the experimenter would, by drawing upon background knowledge of 'what everybody knows', supply a sense to their remarks that was 'empirically identical' with the sense intended by the participants. The experimenter's breaches resulted in interactional breakdowns, and the breaches were quickly and powerfully sanctioned.

Another strand of evidence for the normative nature of interaction comes from the CA study of paired sequences. These are clearly identifiable actions that exhibit recurrent properties. They are informed by normative expectations, such that the producer of a first pair part may try to pursue an absent second part, while the allocated producer of the second part might try to account for its absence. For example, answering questions is treated as a basic moral obligation (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 1968). Answers are responsive actions that become relevant only on the completion of a question, and questions in turn set the agenda of topics and tasks to be dealt with in subsequent talk (Heritage, 2002). Moreover, after the question has been produced, interactants monitor the ensuing talk to determine how it embodies an answer to the question (Schegloff, 1968; 1972). Consider the following extract:

### Example 6

A: Is there something bothering you or not?

(1.0)

A: Yes or no

(1.5)

A: Eh?

B: No.

(from Atkinson and Drew, 1979:52)

The fact that A repeats the question indicates that the answer is expected, while the truncated form of the repeat shows that A does not think B has merely not heard.

Indeed, the question is repeated twice until an answer is provided. Given that the first part of the adjacency pair has been uttered, the second part is relevant and expected. The first part of the adjacency pair therefore sets up normative expectations to which the speakers must attend (Goffman, 1981; Heritage, 1984).

### **3.2.4 Alternative approaches to the analysis of language**

CA is part of a number of approaches that focus on the analysis of language. In this section I review a number of overlapping methodological approaches and explain why I have chosen CA to pursue the present study. In particular I review both approaches that focus on the interplay between structure and discourse, such as critical discourse analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis, as well as more bottom-up approaches such as rhetorical psychology, discourse analysis, and discursive psychology. In discussing each of these approaches, I also explain the benefits that CA offers in relation to them.

The first two approaches I discuss are critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) and Foucauldian discourse analysis (henceforth FDA). Both approaches are interested in the interplay between the wider societal structures and the use of language. While FDA is concerned with the identification of wider discourses in societies (e.g. ‘biomedical discourse’, or ‘romantic discourse’), CDA takes an even more overtly political stance in attempting to identify instances of inequality. Using either of these two approaches would have led me to come to the data with preconceptions as to what might be relevant and what the key issues are. However, as I explained in the introduction, my aim was to examine the practical aspects of ministerial accountability. This meant adopting a method such as CA that allowed me to explore the issues that committee members and ministers were themselves making relevant. Indeed, one of the advantages of CA is that it offers a tool for validating claims by means of participants’ interpretations as displayed in their responses to previous turns (Potter, 2004; Wooffitt, 2005).

Two other approaches related to CA are rhetorical psychology and discourse analysis (henceforth DA). Both approaches enable the analyst to show how people’s descriptions are designed to be persuasive and to counter actual or potential

alternatives, as well as forestall being undermined as partial, biased and interested. To do so, both approaches take a particular interest in the rhetorical organisation of talk, with DA additionally focusing on its sequential organisation (Edwards and Potter, 2003; Potter, 2004). However, even in the case of DA, the sequential organisation of talk is only focused on as a means to an end (e.g. to gain insight into the construction of versions of events) rather than as an end in itself. This made using either of these two approaches problematic. In order to examine the practical aspects of ministerial accountability I needed a method such as CA, which would enable me to examine the patterns and interactional functions served by verbal interactions.

The most similar approach to CA is discursive psychology (henceforth DP). DP focuses on reworking the subject matter of psychology (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Wiggins and Potter, 1997; Wooffitt, 2005) by shifting the focus away from individualistic cognitions and processes to social interaction (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2005). To do so, some DP analysts have adopted many of the characteristics of CA, such as its focus on the sequential organisation of talk, its interest in patterns of verbal interaction, and even its transcription conventions (Hepburn, 2003). Indeed, according to Wooffitt (2005), in terms of technical aspects some forms of DP and CA are almost undistinguishable. Nevertheless, I have chosen to use the term ‘CA’ because adopting the term ‘DP’ as the methodology for my study would lead to confusion, given that the most relevant literature to my research lies in fields other than psychology (e.g. political science). Furthermore, DP studies frequently focus on the way in which concepts originating from psychology are used in talk-in-interaction, whereas my study does not share this particular focus. Adopting the term ‘conversation analysis’ also has the advantage that it refers to a methodology, whereas the term ‘discursive psychology’ does not in itself indicate the type of methodology used.

Thus, CA has a number of advantages for my particular study in comparison to other approaches to the study of language. Due to its focus on the fine-grained elements of interaction and their organisation, CA is a particularly useful method in investigating the construction of accounts. Conversational exchanges and their sequential patterns are central to the CA methodology, because the initial part of the exchange opens up and calls for certain relevant responses from the recipient (Sacks

*et al.*, 1974). This characteristic of CA makes it particularly useful to the study of accounts, as accounts can be identified as such by virtue of their sequential positioning. An interlocutor's accusation, criticism, or complaint projects a range of responses from the addressee. The next speaker's talk in the slot following the criticism will be monitored as responsive or not to that initial act of criticism. As such, accounts become a way to address the truth or falsity of the challenge. Indeed, a number of CA studies show that accounts do not passively re-present events and activities, but actively construct versions of events (e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Drew, 1998).

### **3.3 Data analysis**

#### **3.3.1 Analytic principles**

In analysing the data, I adhered to several core CA principles. The first of these is that the process of analysis was data-driven rather than decided by *a priori* concerns. This is so because participants' own understandings are central to the production and meaning of their actions (Heritage, 1984). Hence, I have refrained as much as possible from making *a priori* assumptions about the relevance of analytic theories and categories, such as for instance participants' motivations, affiliations (e.g. party affiliations), or other theoretical concepts and contextual information (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Heritage, 1984; Potter, 2004; ten Have, 1999).

The second principle was that I focused on sequences of utterances, rather than isolated utterances. I always examined how particular discursive devices were used and what they accomplished *in situ*, in particular stretches of talk in interaction. This is necessary because the meaning of utterances and the actions they perform is considered dependent on their sequential context. In addition, participants continuously and inevitably display their understandings of previous turns in their utterances (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Heritage, 2001). Hence, a focus on sequences and understandings displayed in them is a useful tool for the validation of analytic claims regarding the meaning and function of statements (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, 2004; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974). It is what Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) call the 'next-turn proof procedure' (p. 729).

The third principle was that I took into account all details of talk, including laughter, emphasis and pauses. This is because from a CA perspective, all details of talk can be meaningful for the production of actions (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998).

These analytic principles have guided the progression of the analysis, which I will describe in below.

### **3.3.2 Stages of analysis**

The first stage of data analysis was to repeatedly watch the video recordings of those parts of the meetings involving ministers, in order to gain an initial insight into the kinds of interactions taking place between ministers and committee members.

The second stage was to identify distinct sequences of interactions while watching the video recordings, separate them on the Official Report transcript of the meeting, and identify specific extracts for transcription and initial analysis. This resulted in a large number of extracts, broadly transcribed.

The third stage was to repeatedly read the broadly transcribed extracts identified in the second stage of the analysis in order to divide them into separate datasets. I initially grouped the extracts into three datasets: ‘scrutiny’; ‘managing disagreement’; and ‘avoid answering questions’.

The fourth stage of the analysis was to re-transcribe the extracts that were contained in the datasets identified in the third stage using transcription conventions employed in CA (Jefferson, 1985; see Appendix for list of symbols used). As suggested by ten Have (1999), the process of transcription works as a ‘noticing device’ (p. 78), because it forces the researcher to attend to the details of the interaction that would escape the ordinary listener. It thereby helps focus the analytic attention on the organisation of the interaction (Heath and Luff, 1993).

The fifth stage of the analysis was to repeatedly read the CA transcripts and analyse each of them individually as a way of finding out more about the particular interactional activities performed. For example, the dataset ‘scrutiny’ was divided into two further datasets: one composed of extracts in which committee members attended to matters of stake and interest; and one in which they worked up particular issues as accountable. Within each of these new datasets, further divisions emerged.

The dataset on attending to own accountability was further subdivided into one set of extracts in which committee members report others' views, and another set of extracts in which committee members represent others' interests. The dataset on scrutinising ministers' statements was divided into one set of extracts in which committee members challenge ministers' decisions, and another set of extracts in which they hold the minister accountable for taking action. The dataset 'managing disagreement' was further subdivided into extracts in which committee members made ministers accountable for taking action and ministers accounted for their decision not to do so, and another set of data in which ministers responded to challenges posed by committee members. The first of these datasets was further subdivided into 'taking action as impossible'; 'need for action as others' fault'; 'inaction as normative within particular circumstances'; 'taking action as inappropriate'. The second dataset was subdivided into defending the course of action taken; constructing an alternative course of action as problematic; attributing responsibility elsewhere; and detracting from the negative consequences of action taken. Finally, the dataset 'avoiding to answer' was further subdivided into avoiding to answer by constructing the timing as inappropriate; avoiding to answer by constructing the question as unfair; and avoiding to answer by involving the convenor.

At this stage, I made use of a number of analytic tools. A first analytic 'tool' I used is variability in the content and the design of utterances. Even when speakers are describing the most routine and commonplace events or states of affairs, they have a wide range of alternative words and combinations of words from which to choose (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, 1996). As Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue, the selection of one description rather than another is based on the function that a certain description can fulfil at a particular point in the conversation. Therefore, variability is a valuable tool to gain insight into the functions of descriptions (Potter, 2004).

A second 'tool' I used was continuously asking questions of the data. There is an interest in the social and interactional functions of identifiable conversational phenomena. I asked questions such as 'what interactional business is being mediated or accomplished through the use of the sequential pattern? How do participants

demonstrate their active orientation to this business? (cf. Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). Why this utterance now? (cf. Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998).

The third ‘tool’ was the CA literature. I made use of findings regarding discursive devices and their functions in previous studies. Particularly useful were devices related to interest and accountability, which I have already outlined in section 3.3.

A fourth ‘tool’ was the examination of deviant cases. As several authors have pointed out, if one or a couple of cases do not fit in with an analytic claim, the claim needs to be adjusted in such a way that it can include these anomalies as well (Potter, 2004; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2001). On the other hand, if one can show that certain features of the extracts are recognisably different from the ‘average’ extract, this strengthens the analytic claim (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This is especially so if one can show that the participants orient to the anomalous nature of the interaction (cf. Potter, 2004).

The fifth ‘tool’ I used to refine the analysis was discussing it with colleagues and supervisors, to ‘test’ the credibility of my claims and modify where necessary.

In most cases, the use of these tools led to breaking down the transcripts into even shorter extracts, refining or changing the codes used for them, as well as adding/removing particular extracts from the datasets. In addition, I selected extracts for presentation in the thesis because they were clear, ‘typical’ examples of a certain utterance design, pattern or action which I had identified in the datasets.

## **3.4 Methodological issues**

### **3.4.1 Focusing on audio elements**

While undertaking the analysis, I decided to focus on the audible elements of the interaction and not to include the visual elements discernible from the video recordings. I did so for two reasons, which I will explain below.

The first reason is a pragmatic one, and is related to the relatively poor quality of the video recording, which did not allow me to have as clear a view as I would have liked of the speakers’ gestures during the meeting.



The second reason is related to my particular interest being in the exchange of questions and answers rather than the non-verbal dimension. Some CA researchers have used video recordings to study visual aspects of interaction (e.g. C. Goodwin, 1981, 1987, 1996; C. Goodwin and M.H. Goodwin, 1996; Heath, 1986, 1989; Heath and Luff, 1996), and this body of work has demonstrated that video analysis can be used in a complementary fashion to audio-based CA. However, most of the studies referenced above take the verbal production by the participants as a base-line for the understanding of the interaction, and only subsequently add visual details<sup>6</sup> to make the analysis more completely an analysis of the face-to-face interaction (cf. Heath and Luff, 1993). The existing literature therefore suggests that unless the analysis is focused on settings in which core aspects of the action relate to the physical environment (e.g. Jordan and Henderson, 1995; Suchman and Trigg, 1991), the inclusion of visual information does not necessarily lead to a more insightful analysis than the analysis of audio information alone. In the case of my particular study, the inclusion of visual elements would not have contributed towards answering the specific research questions identified in the literature review.

Having access to the data on video rather than audiotapes did however prove useful in providing me with a more ‘embodied’ sense of the interaction. As argued by ten Have (1999), video recordings provide a wealth of contextual information that may be extremely helpful in the analysis of talk-in-interaction, especially in complex settings such as meetings, where several speakers are present.

### **3.4.2 Sequential CA vs. MCA**

Having outlined the benefits of CA’s focus on the sequential aspects of interaction for the analysis of accounts in section 3.2.4, it is also important to note that not all CA work focuses on the sequential aspects of talk-in-interaction. Whilst the majority of CA studies deal with explicating the sequential organisation of talk, another strand called ‘Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) focuses on the use of ‘membership categories’ (Sacks, 1992; 1972). These are part of sets of categories, which are called Membership Categorisation Devices (MCDs, Sacks,

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<sup>6</sup> Prominent among these details is the direction of the gaze of the participants and marked gestures.

1972). An example of a MCD is ‘family’, which contains categories such as father, mother, son, and daughter. Such categories are inference-rich: mentioning a category invokes a range of expectancies about the attributes of that category, for instance in terms of knowledge, rights and normal activities. Membership categories initially constituted a strong focus during the development of CA (Sacks, 1972), but interest in these has later receded into the background. However, some conversation analysts have attempted to remain focused on membership categories and have developed their approach into ‘Membership Category Analysis’ (Hester and Eglin, 1997). In my study, I pay attention to the use of membership categories as well as to the sequential organisation of talk. Similarly to Schegloff (2007), I consider ‘MCA’ as integral part of CA.

### **3.4.3 Taking a broad definition of what constitutes a question**

In undertaking the analysis, I have adopted a broad definition of what constitutes a ‘question’. According to Heritage (2002), in its most elementary form a question is a form of social action designed to seek information and accomplished in a turn at talk by means of interrogative features (e.g. ‘do you have the time?’; ‘what time is it?’). However, these interrogative features are not essential to questioning. Questions can also be asked through the use of declarative features, indicated through rising intonation (Quirk *et al.*, 1985) or making a statement about some matter which the recipient has rights to know more about than the speaker (Heritage and Roth, 1995; Labov and Fanshel, 1977). Another way in which questions can be asked is through interrogatively framed utterances that do not accomplish questioning in the sense of information seeking. Nevertheless, these types of questions elicit an answer through accomplishing various forms of indirect speech acts (Levinson, 1983; Schegloff, 1988; Searle, 1975), where responses only briefly acknowledge their interrogative packaging (Schegloff, 1988). Questions can also be asked through interrogatives characterised by accusatory features (e.g. ‘Why on earth...?’). Finally, the sequential context in which some questions are placed enables these to accomplish actions other than questioning. An example of such an

instance is Schegloff's (1984) discussion of the utterance 'by what standard' used as an agreement. In my analysis, I have treated all these forms as questions.

### **3.5 Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have made a case for the use of conversation analysis in exploring the practical aspects of ministerial accountability towards the Scottish parliamentary committees. In particular, CA allows a close analysis of turn-by-turn unfolding of the interaction, and its focus on the sequential organisation of talk has already proven to be a useful tool in examining issues of accountability within institutional settings. The use of CA has therefore enabled me to pursue the research questions identified in the literature review. In particular, I was able to investigate the way in which committee members' questions make ministers accountable while also attending to issues of stake and interest; differently ways in which challenges are formulated and responded to; the strategies used for holding the minister accountable for (in)action; and the limited extent to which accountability can be accomplished through the use of questions. I will demonstrate this in the following analytic chapters. To begin with, in chapter 4, I examine the ways in which committee members accomplish accountability by examining the way in which they work up particular issues as accountable in their interactions with ministers, while at the same time attending to their own accountability. In chapter 5, I examine the different ways in which challenges towards ministers are accomplished by the committee members, and the ways in which ministers counter these. In chapter 6, I examine the way in which accountability for taking action is worked out in the interaction between committee members and ministers, and explore the strategies used by ministers to legitimate inaction. In chapter 7, I examine different ways in which ministers attempt to avoid answering questions.

## Chapter 4. Accomplishing accountability through questions

In chapter 2, I outlined three specific research questions I pursue in this study. The present chapter will address the first of these questions: How do committee members accomplish accountability in their interactions with ministers? I will begin by providing an overview of existing political science and CA/DA research on parliamentary committees and accountability, as these areas are strongly relevant to the concerns addressed in this chapter.

The existing literature on parliamentary committees indicates that increasing powers have recently been allocated to these committees, particularly in relation to governmental matters (Longley and Davidson, 1998). For example, a study carried out by Shaw (1998) found that on a global level, there is a movement away from *ad hoc* committees to standing committees. This more stable committee structure (adopted, among others, by the Scottish Parliament) was created to increase parliament's ability scrutinise the work of ministers and therefore increase ministers' levels of accountability (Woodhouse, 1994). Indeed, a comparison of parliamentary committees across 18 European countries undertaken by Mattson and Strom (1996) found that this more stable committee structure enables parliamentary committees to focus more in-depth on making ministers accountable.

One aspect that is missing from the existing literature on parliamentary committees is an investigation into how committee members accomplish accountability during their meetings with ministers, i.e. the way in which committee members' questions make ministers accountable. On this topic, the political science literature only provides the assumption that party-political interests bias committee members' questions. This assumption can be inferred from the work of Damgaard (1998), who examined different ways in which political parties control or constrain the behaviour of their committee members. The study found that parties apply a range of incentives that strongly motivate committee members to adhere to the party's goals. Incentives include offering members seats on better and more

prestigious committees; appointing party members as convenors of committees; offering advancements in the party group hierarchy; providing leading position within parliament as a whole; and, in cases where the party is elected to government, promoting them to ministerial posts. In addition to incentives to follow the party lines, parties can also apply sanctions to recalcitrant committee members. These include removal from the committee; being stripped of tasks for the party group; and not being reappointed to the committee in the subsequent session. As committee work is important for advancement in the party hierarchy and for prospects of re-election, these sanctions are damaging to the MPs career, and the mere possibility of these sanctions acts as a constraint.

While there are no discursive/CA studies specifically within the context of parliamentary committees, work within this tradition generally indicates that the act of calling for an account from another can be face threatening. In particular, the discourse action model (DAM) formulated by Edwards and Potter (1992) suggests that speakers are aware of the interested nature of their utterances, and appreciate that it makes them accountable. As a result, utterances are often designed in ways that anticipate their possible refutation or undermining as false, partial, or interested. Indeed, empirical work shows that accounts are often sought in indirect ways, for example through the use of indirect questions (Atkinson and Drew, 1979) or appearing to notice some state of affairs about the other person in order to invite an account (Antaki, 1994).

An empirical discourse analytic study of letters written by research ethics committees<sup>7</sup> (RECs) to applicants (O'Reilly, Dixon-Woods, Angell, Ashcroft, and Bryman, 2008) found a variety of ways in which committee members attend to the need to accomplish accountability when addressing applicants through their letters. In particular, the study found that the letters drew attention to the process behind the decision, including its collaborative nature; held the applicants accountable, by implying that any decisions made by the REC can be attributed to the performance of the applicants; referred to specialist expertise; and substantiated decisions by calling

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<sup>7</sup> REC committees are charged with adjudicating the ethical status of research projects, and determining the conditions necessary for such projects to proceed. Both because of their position in the research process and because of the controversial nature of ethical judgement, REC's views and decisions need to be accountable.

upon external authorities. These tactics accomplish accountability by showing that routines of ethical assessment have been enacted, by establishing the factuality of claims, and by managing questions of fault and blame attribution. However, in the absence of verbal interaction, the study was not able to delve into the sequential positioning of such accounts.

CA research conducted in a variety of contexts shows that speakers use questions to accomplish particular actions. In doing so, the research shows that speakers also orient to their own accountability in terms of stake and interest (e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Clayman and Heritage, 2002). This is particularly the case in formal institutional settings, where the institutional figure asks the questions and the witness or interviewee is expected to provide the answers (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). In such contexts, the formal features of the interaction lead to questions being used to accomplish a wide range of accountable activities, such as disputing or generating controversy (Heritage, 1989). For example, one of the goals of the prosecuting Counsel in a court of law is to make accusations and challenges. The Counsel does this by deploying some sequences of questions rather than others. However, if the counsel is seen to stray too far beyond the minimal requirements of asking questions they may be reprimanded by the judge. As a result, the Counsel uses questions to attribute blame over several turns, thereby avoiding reprimand (Atkinson and Drew, 1979). Similarly, news interviewers are required to use questions in order to challenge their interviewees while highlighting their neutrality. Clayman and Heritage (2002) has researched the way footing shifts are used in the achievement of neutrality in television news broadcast interviews. As previously indicated in chapter 3, footing points to the perspective from which an account is offered. In particular, it distinguishes between three different roles that are available for the production of speech: the principal, whose position the talk is meant to represent; the author, who does the scripting; and the animator, who says the words. In researching the use of footing shifts in news interview settings, Clayman's argument is that when interviewers confront an interviewee with a contentious description of some state of affairs, they tend to produce it as a quote from a particular speaker, or even treat it as what people in general have claimed. Confirmation about the role of footing in news interviews can be found by

considering in detail the manner and placement of footing shifts. For example, footing shifts tend to appear when more contentious factual claims are made, or even when contentious words are used.

As outlined at the beginning, in the present chapter I will examine the way in which committee members ‘accomplish accountability’ when addressing government ministers. To do so, I will examine how committee members work up particular issues as accountable, and the way in which they make ministers accountable for those issues. Another question I will explore in the present chapter is the way in which committee members attend to their own accountability in addressing ministers.

### **Analytic procedure**

The analysis was based on instances of questions asked by committee members of ministers. While agreeing with the need to identify sequences of interaction in using CA (as explained in chapter 3), in this chapter I will exclusively focus on the questions asked by the committee members and leave the analysis of the responses for later chapters. The reason for doing so is that devoting an entire chapter to questions makes the analytic points clearer by allowing me to focus on the different ways in which accountability is accomplished by the committee members without (in the first instance) having to also examine ministers’ responses. As such, this chapter sets the scene for the subsequent empirical chapters in which I broaden the scope of the analysis to sequences of interactions between committee members and ministers. Therefore, while in this chapter the extracts only show the questions asked, I return to some of the same extracts in subsequent chapters to examine the interaction with the ministers.

The first analytic section is based on instances in which committee members use indirect questions to accomplish accountability (section 4.1). The second analytic section shows a variety of ways in which committee members accomplish accountability through the use of ministers’ statements (section 4.2). For example, I show the way in which such statements are used to challenge ministers’ decisions, and to undermine ministers’ credibility. The analysis for the final analytic section (section 4.3) focuses on instances in which committee members used footing to attend to their own accountability. This analysis was developed from two sets of

extracts: one set in which committee members report others' views, and another set in which committee members represent others' interests. Initial analysis made apparent that in both datasets, committee members attend to issues of interest and stake when confronting the minister with challenging questions.

## 4.1 Accomplishing accountability through indirect questions

I will start by examining instances in which committee members accomplish accountability through indirect questions. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 1

The Cubie report was the result of the work of the Cubie committee (named after chairperson Andrew Cubie), which formed in July 1999 at the request of the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition governing Scotland. The report consisted of a comprehensive review of university tuition fees and the finances of Scottish students, as well as recommendations for change.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 01:32:06-01:32:35

ES is Elizabeth Smith (Conservative MSP)

1. ES: Could I ask if your uh Scottish Executive (.)
2. .hh would in any way consider (.) .hh the possibility
3. of a second Cubie report >perhaps not necessarily
4. chaired by< uh Mister Cubie but a- a similar (.)
5. u:h enquiry .h into: uh how funding .hh could take place
6. to ensure that that pursuit of excellence (.)
7. uh is assumed in the future (.) coz >as I say<
8. I think it's a very deep concern amongst the sector↑
9. and particularly amongst uh students themselves, (.)
10. .hh uh as to where that money is going to come from.



## Extract 2

All new teachers in Scotland are required to fulfil a period of probation (generally one year full-time) before being awarded full registration as a teacher. Under the Labour Government, there had been a shortage of available probationary posts, a situation the new SNP Government is addressing. This question follows the minister's announcement of 300 new posts for probationary teachers.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 01:26:43-01:27:06

KM is Ken Mackintosh (Labour MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

Topic: Increase in number of probationary teachers

1. KM: >Can I just< ask about uh probationary (.) teachers↓
2. >can I just< ask uh clearly (.) given the anxiety that exists u:m
3. the announcement of >three hundred new posts
4. is very welcome< indeed (.) u:h >can I just< ask u:m
5. how (.) your figure (.) >of three hundred< was reached,
6. what the calculation is↓ (.) um coz clearly (.)
7. u::h the worry is that that may not be enough.

In both of the above extracts, the committee members make the ministers accountable. The committee members accomplish this in two ways. The first way is by constructing a particular state of affairs as problematic. In extract 1, this is accomplished through the use of 'it [funding]'s a very deep concern amongst the sector↑' (line 8), where the modifying feature 'very deep concern' (line 8) and 'it's a [...] concern' (line 8) serve to work up funding as problematic. In extract 2, 'given the anxiety that exists [in relation to probationary posts]' (line 2) uses 'given' and the suggestion that 'anxiety [...] exists' to construct the availability of probationary posts as a problem. In both cases, the committee members work up consensus to make their constructions of the problematic state of affairs appear factual. In extract 1, this is achieved through the change from saying that the concern exists among 'the [higher education] sector' (line 8) to subsequently indicating that it exists 'particularly amongst [...] students' (line 9). The use of 'particularly' (line 9) indicates that the concern is shared by students as well as other members of 'the sector' (line 8). In extract 2, consensus is worked up through the use of 'given the anxiety' (line 2), which implies objectivity in relation to the existence of anxiety.

Another way in which the committee members make the ministers accountable in the above extracts is by asking a question in relation to the problematic state of

affairs identified above. In extract 1, the committee member asks if the government would consider undertaking an enquiry into funding. In extract 2, the committee member asks how the government has calculated the number of probationary posts to be introduced, and states that the three hundred new posts may not be enough to solve the problem. In both cases, then, the committee members indirectly make a reference to action as the way to resolve the problematic state of affairs. In extract 1, the committee member asks if the government ‘would in any way consider’ undertaking the enquiry, thereby making a reference to action. This question appears indirect through the use of the conditional tense, the modifying feature ‘in any way’ (line 2), and the tentative nature of the verb ‘consider’ (line 2). Furthermore, the question is introduced through ‘could I ask’ (line 1), which through asking for permission and the use of the conditional tense further contributes to making the question appear indirect. In extract 2, the reference to action is made by asking how the number of new places was calculated, and subsequently suggesting that this number may not be sufficient to solve the problem. The use of ‘the worry’ (line 7) and the conditional ‘may not be enough’ (line 7) indirectly assess the ministers’s previous actions to resolve the problematic state of affairs as insufficient, thereby indicating the need for further action. Similarly to extract 1, the reference to action is made to appear indirect. The question is introduced through ‘>can I just< ask’ (lines 1 and 2), which appears indirect through asking permission to pose the question, and is used by the committee member three times in this extract. The committee member also reformulates ‘your figure [...] was reached’ (line 5) into ‘what the calculation is↓’ (line 6), removing the agency away from the minister through the change from ‘your figure’ (line 5) to the use of the passive voice in the reformulated version. This serves to make the formulation less directly focused on the minister, and thereby less direct.

Based on the above, the committee members in the two extracts make the ministers accountable by identifying a particular state of affairs as problematic, and indicating that the minister can resolve this state of affairs through action. The committee members also attend to the potentially challenging aspects of making the minister accountable for taking action. The committee members accomplish this by making their constructions of the problematic state of affairs appear factual rather

than subjective. Furthermore, the committee members make the reference to taking action appear indirect through formulating it as a question (rather than an assertion), requesting for permission to ask, and making use of the conditional tense and modifying features.

Overall, then, the committee members in the above extracts make their utterances hearably represent a request for action, thereby making the ministers accountable. In doing so, the committee members also protect themselves from the interactionally problematic aspects of their request. Therefore, the committee members' utterances serve a dual purpose: to make the ministers accountable, and to protect the committee members from challenges in relation to their utterances.

## 4.2 Accomplishing accountability using ministers' statements

Another way in which the committee members accomplish accountability is by using something the minister said. I will begin by examining two extracts in which the committee members base particular questions on what the minister said. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 3

This question relates to the SNP manifesto pledge of asking the UK Government for the creation of a Scottish News Service.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 00:29:06-00:29:16  
JP is Jeremy Purvis (Lib Dem MSP)

1. JP: You said 'as a very minimum (.)
2. .h we will demand the creaton- creation
3. of a Scottish News Service' (.) uh unquote
4. what- what are your plans to: deliver that

#### Extract 4

This question relates to the up-front fees paid by non-Scottish domiciled students from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland studying in Scotland, and to the fact that Scottish students only have to pay back their tuition fees (initially paid for by the Scottish Government) after graduating and earning an income. This differential approach between Scottish and non-Scottish domiciled students had been introduced by the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition after the publication of the Cubie report.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 02:15:02-02:15:36

JP is Jeremy Purvis (Lib Dem MSP)

1. JP: >I think< you're on the. record for saying
2. that the application of the- uh fees for English students
3. is anti-English uh (.) and I think >y'know< in the past
4. you've said that .hh English students would be treated the same
5. as students from any other country including Scots uhm for-
6. under an SNP (.) Government and uh we are the only party
7. that has made a stan<sup>↑</sup>ce on this
8. .hh >just wondering< what your intentions are
9. to change the approach for the .hh (.) application of (.) fees
10. to English-domiciled students.

In extracts 3 and 4, JP reminds the ministers of particular statements: 'you said [...] unquote' (extract 3, lines 1-3); 'you're on the. record for saying' (extract 4, line 1). A first observation is that JP substantiates the accuracy of these statements. In extract 3, this is accomplished through 'unquote' (line 3), which indicates that the statement represents a direct quote and is therefore accurate. In extract 4, this is done through 'you're on the. record' (line 1), indicating that the report of the statement is based on recorded evidence. A second observation is that JP uses these statements as the basis for his subsequent questions. In extract 3, 'what are your plans to: deliver that' (line 4) is based on the premise that the minister intends to accomplish what she had previously said she would. In extract 4, 'what [are] your intentions [...] to change the approach' (lines 8-9) is based on the premise that the minister will follow up her criticisms of the fees with action designed to change the current fee situation.

The reports of previous statements, then, serve to establish the questions as logical inferences that are made available by what the minister had previously said. As such, the questions make the ministers accountable for acting in line with previous statements. This way of accomplishing accountability also constructs the

person asking the questions as an impartial observer making a logical inference, rather than as someone with a vested interest.

The way in which reporting what the minister said serves to both make the minister accountable and to construct oneself as impartial can also be seen in instances in which the committee members use a previous statement by the minister to question the reasoning behind a particular ministerial decision. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 5

The term ‘PPP’ is an acronym for ‘public-private partnerships’, a form of funding which involves a contract between a public sector authority and a private party, in which the private party provides a public service or project and assumes substantial financial, technical and operational risk in the project. The ‘Scottish Futures Trust’ refers to a limited company with all of the shares being owned by Scottish ministers, set up by the SNP party to provide an alternative form of funding to PPP. This question relates to the minister’s announcement that the Scottish Futures Trust will eliminate PPP as a funding option for the building of new schools by local authorities.

ELLCC, 27/06/07:2; 01:20:45-01:20:54

KW is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC)

1. KW: If you th- um believe (.) that the Scottish Futures Trust↓ (.)
2. .hh will squeeze out um PPP,
3. why are you giving local authorities the option?

### Extract 6

The term ‘Business Gateway’ relates to a governmental body that provides advice and support to Scottish businesses. The question relates to the minister’s announcement about the restructuring of the Business Gateway.

EETC 05/12/07:10; 01:08:33-01:08:52

DW is David Whitton (Labour MSP)

1. DW: You’ve just said that there’s still discussions
2. to be hhhel- held on .hh where the >sort of<
3. central management of the Business Gateway’s gonna be
4. whether it’s Scottish Enterprise or local authorities
5. an’ you also say you want consistency an’ quality (.)
6. .hhh well (.) >I mean< if you don’t yet know

7. where the central fun<sup>↑</sup>ction's gonna be
8. why on earth<sup>↑</sup> are you breaking up<sup>↑</sup> the Business Gateway
9. and sending it out to thirty-two local authorities.

### Extract 7

The 'Graduate Endowment Fee' is the fee payable by Scottish students after graduating, when earning an income above a certain threshold. The question relates to the SNP Government's decision to abolish the Graduate Endowment Fee.

ELLCC 28/11/07:11; 00:11:25-00:11:48

KW is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC)

1. KW: Minister you highlighted a number of quotes
2. when you suggested that. students u:m
3. .hh had enjoyed university but. dropped out
4. becau::se .hh um they didn't have any mo<sup>↑</sup>ney.
5. .hh um if they didn't have any money
6. while undertaking their cou<sup>↑</sup>rse
7. .hh how is abolish(hhh)ing the Graduate Endowment
8. going to improve .hh the amount of money
9. they have whilst undertaking education?

In extracts 5 to 7, the committee members begin by reporting something the minister said: 'you [...] believe [...] that' (extract 5, line 1); 'you've just said that [...] you also say you want' (extract 6, lines 1-5); 'you highlighted a number of quotes' (extract 7, line 1). The committee members use the reports of what the minister said to work up particular ministerial decisions as accountable. The committee members accomplish this in two ways. The first way is through using if-then formulations, where the 'if' part, consisting of a report of the minister's statement, is constructed as inconsistent with the 'then' part, referring to the minister's decision. In extract 5, the if-then formulation 'if you [...] believe [...] that [then] why are you' (lines 1-3) constructs the minister's decision to keep PPP as an option as inconsistent with the minister's belief that the introduction of another funding mechanism (the Scottish Futures Trust) will make this (PPP) option less popular with local authorities. In extract 6, the if-then formulation 'if you don't yet know [then] why [...] are you' (lines 6-8) constructs the minister's decision to break up the Business Gateway as inconsistent with not knowing where its central function

will be located. In extract 7, the if-then formulation ‘if they didn’t have [...] [then] how is abolish(hhh)ing [...] the Graduate Endowment going to’ (lines 5-8) constructs the minister’s decision to abolish the Graduate Endowment Fee (due upon earnings beyond a particular threshold after graduation) as inconsistent with the goal of increasing students’ financial resources while studying.

The second way in which the committee members work up ministers’ decisions as accountable is through asking the ministers questions about the reasons behind their decisions. These questions, following reports of ministers’ statements, are designed to construct ministers’ decisions as illogical. In extract 5, the question ‘why are you giving local authorities the option [of PPP]?’ (line 3), after reporting the minister’s belief that this option will be made redundant, constructs providing the option as inconsistent with this belief and therefore illogical. In extract 6, the use of the negative interrogative ‘why on earth↑’ (line 8) constructs the minister’s decision to break up the Business Gateway before having determined its central location as nonsensical. In extract 7, laughter in line 7 (i.e. while asking the question), after having reported the minister’s use of student’s quotes, mocks the minister’s decision and makes the inference available that the decision will be ineffective in tackling student’s financial problems while studying.

The committee members, then, work up particular decisions as accountable by constructing the decision as inconsistent with the minister’s statement and asking the minister to explain the reasons behind their decision. Through making the ministers accountable using if-then formulations and asking questions, the committee members appear as objective observers pointing out inconsistencies in the ministers’ line of reasoning, rather than as subjective critics of the ministers’ decisions.

In other instances, ministers’ previous statements are reported so as to make ministers accountable for those statements. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 8

This question relates to the SNP's decision to abolish the Graduate Endowment Fee.

ELLCC 28/11/07:11; 00:15:23-00:15:54

ES is Elizabeth Smith (Conservative MSP)

1. ES: Secretary, um you're obviously aware in England uh just now
2. that uh g- graduates who are gonna go through- I'm sorry,
3. undergraduates who'll be going through uh university
4. from the year two thousand and five two thousand and six (.)
5. .hh have a top-up fee of three thousand↓, (.) .h which is greater
6. than any of the >sort of< fee burden in Scotland just now↓ (.)
7. .hh yet numbers at English universities
8. have actually risen (.) .hh uh over the last year. (.)
9. uh could you tell us a little bit about why (.)
10. that might have happened in England, (.)
11. yet you're confident that in Scotland (.) .hh u:m
12. .h expensive um higher education is putting people off↓

### Extract 9

This question follows a statement by the minister that the effectiveness of reducing the Graduate Endowment Fee is supported by research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, an independent social research charity.

ELLCC 28/11/07:11; 00:08:39-00:09:00

KW is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC)

1. KW: You mentioned the Joseph Rowntree research
2. and indicated that that suggests that
3. .hh u:m there is a problem um with .h um
4. the barrier to participation↑,
5. but was it not the case that the Joseph Rowntree
6. .hh um Foundation research to which you refer
7. was conducted .h prior to: .h the introduction
8. of the Graduate Endowment?

In extracts 8 and 9, the committee members make the ministers accountable for a previous statement. The committee members accomplish this in two ways. The first way is by undermining ministers' previous statements through another state of affairs. In extract 8, the use of 'yet' (line 11) undermines the minister's previous statement that 'in Scotland [...] expensive [...] higher education is putting people



off’ (lines 11-12) by constructing it as inconsistent with the increase in student numbers at universities where the fees are higher than in Scotland. In extract 9, the use of ‘but’ (line 5) undermines the minister’s use of research findings as supporting evidence for the need to abolish the Graduate Endowment Fee by indicating that the research had been conducted before this fee had been introduced.

The second way in which the committee members make the ministers accountable for a previous statement is through the use of questions. In extract 8, the question ‘why [...] that might have happened in England, [...] yet you’re confident that in Scotland’ (lines 9-11) makes the minister accountable for her previous statement about the situation in Scotland by requesting an explanation for the situation in England. In extract 9, the question ‘was it not the case that the [...] research [...] was conducted [...] prior to: [...] the introduction of the Graduate Endowment?’ (lines 5-8) uses the negative interrogative ‘was it not’ (line 5) to ask the minister for confirmation. As both possible responses to this question would be problematic (a confirmatory response would undermine the minister’s point, whereas a negative response would be difficult to substantiate), this question makes the minister accountable for her previous statement.

In making the minister accountable, the committee members attend to their own accountability by constructing themselves as impartial observers. In extract 8, this is done through introducing the question with ‘you’re obviously aware’ (line 1), and the use of ‘actually’ (line 8) in ‘numbers at English universities have actually risen’ (lines 7-8), both of which establish the committee member’s construction of the situation in England as factual. Describing the minister as ‘aware’ (line 1) of the situation in England also makes the inference available that she can provide an explanation for the difference between Scotland and England, thereby attending to the question being perceived as a challenge. In extract 9, the use of ‘the case’ (line 5) serves to establish an alternative state of affairs (the research being conducted prior to the introduction of the Graduate Endowment Fee) as factual, while avoiding disagreement with the minister by asking for confirmation (‘was it not’, line 5) rather than making an assertion.

In both extracts, then, the committee members make the minister accountable for previous statements, while also attending to their own accountability. Making the

minister accountable for previous statements can also be used to call into question the ministers' credibility. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 10

This question relates to the SNP's manifesto pledge to ask for the creation of a Scottish News Service referred to in extract 3, and was asked soon after.

ELLCC, 27/06/07:2; 00:30:21-00:30:33

JP is Jeremy Purvis (Lib Dem MSP)

1. JP: I mean the- the language is (.) is very clear (.)
2. 'as a very minimum (.) we will demand (.) the creation
3. of a Scottish News Service' (.)
4. .hh that now seems to be
5. that you'll be opening up discussions.

### Extract 11

This question relates to the SNP's manifesto commitment to increase the provision of nursery facilities.

ELLCC, 27/06/07:2; 01:08:41-01:08:50

PM is Pauline McNeill (Labour MSP)

1. PM: but surely you did cost this bef-
2. when you put it [in your manifesto]
3. FH: [ of course, yeah ]
4. PM: as a pledge, and now you're saying .hh uh that (.)
5. you can't fulfil this pledge
6. because you need to talk to local authorities.

### Extract 12

This question relates to the decision to transfer the responsibility for skills training from local authorities to a national body.

ELLCC, 26/09/07:5; 03:44:22-03:44:45

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. JP: Cabinet Secretary, you- you- you told the committee (.)
2. that there was (.) consultation responses (.)
3. that favoured the removal (.) of the local skills (.) functions (.)

4. .h into a national body↓ (0.2)
5. now I'm not picking up (.) that (.) you're in a position
6. to publish that↑ (.) am I right in saying
7. that there's actually is no consultation responses↓ (.)
8. .hh to removing the local enterprise functions (.) for skills↓ (.)
9. into a national skills agency↓

In extracts 10 to 12, the committee members establish a contrast between two statements/actions related to the minister. The contrast is established in two ways. The first way is by highlighting that the two statements were made at two different points in time. In extracts 11 and 12, this is accomplished through using the past tense when talking about the first statement/action, and the present tense in talking about the second statement: 'you did cost this [...] now you're saying' (extract 11, lines 1-4); 'you told the committee [...] now I'm not picking up' (extract 12, lines 1-5). In extract 10, the past tense is replaced through a quote from the minister's party (pre-election) manifesto: 'the language [...] is very clear [...] that now seems to be' (lines 1-4). The second way in which the contrast is established is through constructing the content of the two statements/actions as inconsistent with one another. In extract 10, the minister's party manifesto statement is described as 'the language [...] is very clear' (line 1). Furthermore, the quote 'as a very minimum' (line 2) in relation to the action that the minister has promised to take indicates that more can be expected from the minister's party if elected to government. By contrast, the minister's post-election (i.e. second) statement is constructed by JP as 'opening up discu↑ssions' (line 5), meaning that it is not certain whether and when action will be taken. Through establishing this contrast, JP implies that the minister has changed, from the clarity of the (pre-election) manifesto indicating that action will be taken, to (post-election) ambiguity and evasiveness in relation to taking action. Being constructed as evasive in relation to fulfilling a manifesto pledge indicates that the minister may not honour this particular pre-election promise, thereby undermining the minister's credibility. In extract 11, the use of 'su↑rely' (line 1) in 'su↑rely you did cost this' (line 1) constructs the action of evaluating the cost of an initiative before including it as a manifesto pledge as normative. The normative behaviour is subsequently constructed as inconsistent with depending on the approval of local authorities in relation to the cost of the initiative. This makes the inference available

that either the minister's party did not evaluate the cost of the initiative before including it in the manifesto (which would be counter-normative), or that the minister is using local authorities as an excuse not to take action on this particular manifesto commitment. As the first alternative is ruled out through the minister's confirmatory 'of course, yeah' (line 3) that the cost of the initiative had been evaluated, the second interpretation still stands and undermines the minister's credibility through indicating that she is attempting to avoid fulfilling the manifesto commitment. In extract 12, the existence of a consultation is constructed as inconsistent with the inability to publish the responses. This is used by JP to call into question the veracity of the minister's first statement (about the existence of consultation responses), as he interprets the minister's inability to publish the consultation responses as indicating that the minister has lied to the committee about the existence of these responses.

Through establishing a contrast between the two statements made by the ministers (or their party) at different points in time, the committee members make the minister accountable by calling into question ministers' credibility. In doing so, the committee members also attend to issues of stake and interest. This is accomplished in two ways. The first way is by establishing facticity. In extract 10, facticity is established through the use of a quotation from the minister's party manifesto. In extract 11, the same purpose is served by the minister's confirmation of the committee member's statement. In extract 12, JP establishes facticity through 'told the committee' (line 1), thereby constructing the other committee members as witnesses to what the minister had said.

Another way in which the committee members attend to matters of stake and interest is by allowing room for error in their utterances. In extract 10, this is accomplished through 'that now seems to be' (line 4), the use of 'seems to be' (line 4) allowing for the possibility that appearances are deceptive and that the minister does intend to honour her party's manifesto commitment. In extract 11, room for error is introduced through the use of 'su↑rely' (line 1) in 'su↑rely you did cost this' (line 1), which leaves open the possibility that the minister's party may have acted counter-normatively and not evaluated the cost of the initiative before including it as a manifesto pledge. In extract 12, JP allows room for error through the use of the

modified non-receipt ‘I’m not picking up’ (line 5), and asking the minister for confirmation through ‘am I right in saying’ (line 6), both of which construct his conclusion that there are no consultation responses as a subjective personal impression rather than as an assertion of fact. This allows for the possibility that his impression is mistaken, thereby insulating himself from the accusation of making an accusation. Furthermore, describing the minister as not being ‘in a position’ (line 5) to publish the consultation responses allows JP to imply that the minister cannot publish these without having to specify the reason for this.

In extracts 10 to 12, then, the committee members make the minister accountable by highlighting a discrepancy between two statements related to the minister and thereby undermining the minister’s credibility. In doing so, the committee members also attend to their own accountability by establishing facticity and setting up their utterances so as to allow room for error.

Overall, extracts 3 to 12 show a variety of ways in which ministers’ statements can be used to accomplish accountability. Ministers’ statements can be used to make ministers accountable, for example by asking what actions will be taken to follow up on these statements (extracts 3 and 4), challenging the reasoning of particular ministerial decisions (extracts 5 to 7), questioning the accuracy of particular statements (extracts 8 and 9), and undermining the minister’s credibility (extracts 10 to 12). As I have shown in each of these cases, making the minister accountable through previous statements also enables committee members to attend to their own accountability, and therefore insulate themselves against possible accusations of bias.

### **4.3 Accomplishing accountability through representing others**

In the previous two sections, I examined different ways in which committee members accomplished accountability. In doing so, I showed that in working up particular issues as accountable, committee members also displayed awareness of their own accountability through attending to matters of stake and interest. In this section, I will focus on this last issue by showing another way in which committee

members attend to such matters, namely by constructing themselves as representing others. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 13

This question relates to the SNP Government's manifesto pledge to reduce the number of pupils in Primary 1 (P1) to Primary 3 (P3)<sup>8</sup> pupils to a maximum of eighteen pupils per class across Scotland. The question follows a series of exchanges in which several committee members ask the minister to provide target dates for the reduction in class sizes, while the minister indicates that she intends to measure progress year-on-year rather than by setting specific target dates in advance.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 01:57:45-01:58:04

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. JP: I think Cabinet Secretary you've said
2. that you wish to see (.) substantial progress year on year=
3. FH: =yeah=
4. JP: → =I think it is fair for Parliament (.) to actually ask
5. how you are defining (.) substantial (.) progress (.)
6. → and so far you haven't↓ (.) and I think it is (.) correct
7. that Parliament would be (.) .hh looking to ask you
8. how you define substantial progress.

### Extract 14

The second part of this extract was presented in section 4.2 as extract 10. The question relates to the SNP manifesto pledge to ask the UK Government for the creation of a Scottish News Service.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 00:30:14-00:30:33

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JP: I was just wondering the- the- the-
2. → so the committee uh understands the-
3. the type of discussions that there will be:
4. because I mean the- the language is (.) is very clear (.)
5. 'as a very minimum (.) we will demand (.) the creation
6. of a Scottish News Service' (.)
7. .hh that now seems to be
8. that you'll be opening up discu↑ssions.

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<sup>8</sup> Refers to school years.

### Extract 15

This question relates to the government's decision to take the administration of the skills agenda away from the college sector and to restructure it at the national level.

ELLCC, 26/09/07:5; 03:40:05-03:40:38

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP)

1. JP:→The colleges were very clear that the- (.)
2. their priorities was for the skills agenda to be set locally, (.)
3. coz the colleges are able to react (.) quicker (.)
4. >to the< local (.) .h economic environment↓ (.)
5. that's what we're told uh in the previous sessions quite clear↓ (.)
6. .hh um (.) and (.) m- moving away the skills functions↓
7. and (.) .h setting the local priorities (.) .h with the skills functions
8. that were set within the local enterprise companies
9. working closely with their college partners (.) .h in the area
10. loca- in the area (.) learning↓ plans (.)
11. uh w- why (.) are you making that (.) to be a national agency?

### Extract 16

This question relates to the SNP Government's decision to abolish the Graduate Endowment Fee.

ELLCC 28/1/07:11; 01:09:28-01:09:54

ES is Elizabeth Smith (Conservative MSP)

1. ES: →Many (.) people who are obviously
2. in favour of some of the po- policy proposals
3. uh that you have on the table just now (.)
4. → .hh but there are also↓ (.) huh many people
5. who are (.) very critical (.) .hh that
6. this doesn't actually really address
7. some of the key issues (.) .hh both in terms of access, (.)
8. .h and >in terms of:< u:m what is best
9. for higher education in the country. (.) and as I-
10. I come back to the point about the fact that
11. if you wanted to persuade us of that (.) .hh and-
12. and certainly want to persuade Parliament of that,
13. it would have been better (.)
14. .hh u:m to go throu:gh some of the alternatives.

### Extract 17

This question relates to the positioning of the culture portfolio outside the newly formed SNP Ministerial Cabinet.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 00:05:43-00:06:09

KW is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC)

1. KW: →It's been suggested by some (.) that by not having
2. uh somebody sitting round the cabinet table (.)
3. .hh with direct day to day responsi<sup>b</sup>lity for culture
4. .hh there is u::m the <possib<sup>i</sup>lity> that cultural matters .h um
5. could<sup>↑</sup> potentially be forgotten<sup>↓</sup> .hh a:nd tha:t um it won't-
6. we won't actually deli<sup>↑</sup>ver .hh um that cross-cutting agenda
7. uh and culture w- will not feature in all aspects of the
8. u::m current administration's work.

In each of the above extracts, the committee members confront the ministers with a challenge. In extract 13, the challenge is accomplished by providing a formulation of what the minister said ('you've said [...] you wish to see [...] substantial progress year on year', lines 1-2) before making the minister accountable for something (i.e. not having provided a definition of how progress will be evaluated on a particular initiative). In extract 14, as indicated in the analysis for extract 10, JP poses a challenge by making the inference available that the minister is no longer committed to taking action. In extract 15, the committee member poses a challenge by making the minister accountable for moving the skills function away from the colleges, despite their request to keep it local. In extract 16, the committee member poses a challenge by suggesting that the minister had made a mistake in not providing the committee with a range of policy alternatives to abolishing the Graduate Endowment Fee. In extract 17, the committee member challenges the minister's government for not including the culture portfolio into the cabinet.

In putting forward these challenges, the committee members attend to matters of stake and interest. The committee members accomplish this in two ways. The first way is by implying that these challenges are made on behalf of others. In extracts 13 and 14, JP implies that he is representing others' interests. In extract 13, JP uses footing to make it appear as if the question was asked by parliament rather than by himself: 'it is fair for parliament [...] to [...] ask' (line 4); and 'it is [...] correct that



parliament would be [...] looking to ask' (lines 6-7). In extract 14, a similar function is served through indicating that the question is asked 'so the committee [...] understands' (line 2) and therefore not due to personal vested interests. A related way of using footing to extract 13 can be seen in extracts 15 to 17, where the committee members imply that they are merely reporting others' statements. In extract 15, JP attributes the criticisms of the minister's initiative to the colleges in line 1, and subsequently indicates that 'that's what we're told [...] in the previous sessions' (line 5). In extract 16, ES attributes her challenge to 'many people who are [...] very critical' (lines 4-5), thereby indicating that she is merely reporting what these people are saying. In extract 17, the same function is served by 'it's been suggested by some' (line 1).

The second way in which the committee members attend to matters of stake and interest is by constructing their utterances as reasonable. In extract 13, this is accomplished through basing the question on a report of what the minister said ('you've said [...] you wish to see [...] substantial progress', lines 1-2), characterising the question as 'fair' (line 4) and 'correct' (line 6), and pointing out that the minister has so far not provided an answer to that question. In extract 14, the challenging utterance is constructed as reasonable through setting up a contrast between the manifesto pledge for action and the minister's post-election ambiguous position. Furthermore, JP constructs his question as disinterested through 'I was just wondering' (line 1) and indicating that the question is asked for the benefit of the committee, both of which in conjunction with the above-mentioned contrast serve to establish the question as reasonable. In extract 15, JP constructs his question as reasonable through a characterisation of the stakeholders ('their priorities was for the Skills agenda to be set locally', line 2) which contrasts with the minister's initiative, providing an account for the stakeholders' wishes ('coz the colleges are able to react [...] quicker', line 3), and through repairing a sentence hearably leading to a negative assessment (lines 6-10) with asking the minister to account for her decision (line 11). In extract 16, ES establishes her utterance as reasonable by appearing to put forward a balanced view of the minister's policy: 'many [...] people who are [...] in favour [...] but there are also↓ [...] many people who are [...] very critical' (lines 1-5). Furthermore, ES bolsters the negative aspects of the policy through 'very critical'

(line 5) representing a stronger term than the mild form of agreement ‘in favour’ (line 2), and substantiating the criticism by indicating that according to ‘many people’ (line 4), the proposal ‘doesn’t actually really address some of the key issues [...] both in terms of access [...] and >in terms of:< [...] what is best for higher education’ (lines 7-9). Having established the criticism against the minister’s policy as strong and consensual, ES introduces her (challenging) proposal through ‘I come back to the point’ (line 10), thereby constructing it as having been raised before by herself, but not addressed by the minister. This implies that it is reasonable to raise the point again. In extract 17, the challenging utterance is established as reasonable through constructing it as a possibility rather than an assertion, and using the conditional rather than the future tense in ‘could↑ potentially be forgotten↓’ (line 5). Furthermore, the repair from ‘it’ (line 5) to ‘we’ (line 6) in ‘it won’t- we won’t [...] deli↑ver’ (lines 5-6) constructs the committee member as a member of the minister’s group, thereby establishing the challenge as an attempt to help a member of one’s own group, and therefore as reasonable.

In extracts 13 to 17, then, the committee members attend to matters of stake and interest while introducing potential challenges. The committee members accomplish this by constructing themselves as representing others. In the first two extracts, the committee members construct themselves as representing others’ interests, while in the subsequent extracts they construct themselves as merely reporting others’ criticisms. Constructing themselves as representing others therefore allows committee members to make the minister accountable while attending to their own accountability.

## 4.4 Summary and discussion

In the present chapter I have examined different ways in which committee members work up particular issues as accountable. I also showed that in doing so, committee members consistently attend to their own accountability.

These findings are consistent with those of the study of letters written by research ethics committees (RECs) to applicants (O’Reilly, Dixon-Woods, Angell, Ashcroft, and Bryman, 2008), which used discourse analysis to show that REC

letters employed a range of discursive devices to accomplish accountability. The committee members in that study accomplished accountability in writing by showing that routines of ethical assessment have been enacted, establishing the factuality of claims, and managing questions of fault and blame attribution. In the present study, committee members also used a range of devices to accomplish accountability. In particular, committee members worked up ministers' accountability through indirect questions making references to action; reporting something the minister had previously said; and through the use of footing. As in the REC study, the way in which committee members formulated their questions towards ministers served a dual purpose: to make the minister accountable, and to attend to their own accountability. Furthermore, by examining verbal interactions rather than written reports, the present chapter was able to identify devices that do not occur in written documents, particularly repairs, pauses, and hesitations.

The analytic findings in this chapter are also consistent with CA research. The findings relating to the use of previous statements resonate with a study by Pomerantz (1988/1989) suggesting that one way to undermine a version or account is to place it against an alternative account that is already consensually accepted. In the present case, the previous statement invoked by speakers seems to serve the purpose of the consensually accepted account. Furthermore, the way in which speakers attend to accountability concerns contribute to CA research by showing the way in which footing is used in this particular context. In particular, the use of footing in the present data makes it possible for speakers to attribute authorship for the challenging aspects of questions to others, a strategy that has also been found to be frequently used by interviewers in news broadcasts when introducing controversial items (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). On the other hand, the way in which speakers frame raising an issue cannot be defined as footing shifts as in the data on broadcast interviews, as committee members in the present study are including themselves in the category of the people they are speaking on behalf of. This may be because as members of a committee tasked with scrutinising a part of the minister's remit, their membership of the committee or the parliament acts as a category entitlement that they can use to account for their questions. Nevertheless, through implying that they are not only raising the issue for their own benefit, they are still achieving the same

appearance of impartiality as the interviewers in the data from Clayman and Heritage (2002). Another explanation is that the broadcast interview context has been described as taking place under an ideology of neutrality (Clayman, 1992), while the parliamentary committee context has been seen as operating under an ideology of adversariality (Flinders, 2001). As such, we can expect committee members' attempts at attending to their own accountability when asking questions to do so in a different manner from interviewers in news broadcasts. However, as these descriptions are based on researchers' overall impressions of the two contexts rather than an empirical analysis, and also not done with the aim of comparing the two contexts, this explanation should be treated as highly speculative.

In this chapter, I have examined different ways in which committee members use questions to work up particular issues as accountable while also attending to their own accountability. In doing so, I began to address the first of the research questions outlined in the literature review: How do committee members accomplish accountability in their interactions with ministers? I will continue pursuing this question in the subsequent three empirical chapters through examining sequences of interaction between committee members and ministers in relation to matters that are constructed as accountable. In the next chapter, I also begin to specifically address the second research question outlined in the literature review: How are challenges formulated by committee members and responded to by ministers? Pursuing this question will provide important insights into the ways in which adversarial interactions frequently referred to in the literature are handled in practice in relation to challenges.

## Chapter 5. Formulating and countering challenges

In the literature review, I indicated that research on parliamentary settings has emphasised the adversarial nature of interactions between ministers and members of parliament. In the present chapter, I address this issue while pursuing the second research question outlined in the literature review: How are challenges formulated by committee members and responded to by ministers? To do so, I examine the way in which issues are worked up as accountable in the interaction between committee members and ministers, in relation to challenging questions. This chapter will therefore build on the findings of the previous chapter on the way in which accountability is accomplished through questions, and provide further insights into the way in which committee members accomplish accountability in their interactions with ministers. In the present chapter, then, I examine sequences of interaction between committee members and ministers in relation to challenges.

One strong focus of research on ministerial accountability is the way in which the party political nature of Parliament leads to adversarial interactions between ministers and parliamentary committee members (see chapter 2 for in-depth discussion). This body of work describes ministers as defensive in accounting for their actions to members of Parliament. According to this literature, this is because ministers know that given the party political rivalry inherent in parliamentary settings, some of the information they provide will ultimately be used by members of Parliament belonging to other parties to attack the ministers and the party they represent (Flinders, 2001; Judge, 1983). We might therefore assume that challenges are likely to engender particularly defensive disagreements from ministers.

However, CA work and related areas of research indicates that disagreeing with previous turns is interactionally problematic for speakers, and therefore frequently avoided or softened. Within mundane settings, research by Pomerantz (1984) on

agreements and disagreements suggests that expressing disagreement leads to subsequently awkward interactions. Pomerantz (1984) suggests that disagreeing is, in CA terms, interactionally problematic, and is attended to as such by those providing such responses in various ways (e.g. incorporating delays before answering; use of ‘uhs’ and ‘wells’). Furthermore, Sacks (1987) examined instances in which in order to avoid such disagreements, speakers produce an agreement in the first instance, and then modify it into a disagreement later on, as in the example below:

1. A: ‘N they haven’t heard a word huh?
2. B: Not a word, uh-uh. Not- Not a word. Not at all.
3. Except - Neville’s mother got a call...

(Sacks, 1987, p. 36)

While the modification to the original answer provided by B in the example above may appear nonsensical in relation to the first answer, Sacks (1987) shows how this and other modifications of this kind serve a crucial purpose in smoothing over the potentially problematic aspects of social interactions.

CA studies also indicate that challenges are regarded as interactionally problematic. Work by Pomerantz (1978) suggests that utterances are quickly reformulated by speakers as neutral comments once they have been attended to as challenges. Furthermore, in examining responses to self-deprecating statements (e.g. A: ‘I’m trying to get slim’), Pomerantz (1984) shows that interaction partners are expected to express disagreement with such statements (e.g. B: ‘You don’t need to get any slimmer’), as not doing so can be construed as an implicit challenge. The care taken by speakers within mundane settings to preserve the smoothness of the interactions (both in avoiding disagreements and in softening potential challenges) therefore appears inconsistent with the assumptions of political science work on parliamentary settings.

In certain institutional settings, however, formulating challenges is strongly encouraged by the circumstances of the particular setting. Within news broadcast interviews, for example, journalists are expected to challenge their interviewees (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). Similarly, within courts of law, the Counsel is often likely to challenge witnesses for the defence (Atkinson and Drew, 1979). However,

as shown by numerous CA studies (e.g. Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Clayman, 1988; Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, and McDonald, 2006), even within these circumstances challenges are softened in various ways, depending on the constraints placed by the particular institutional context. Within news broadcast interviews, journalists make the challenges using footing shifts (e.g. 'It's been suggested by some'), thereby constructing themselves as merely delivering other people's challenges (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). Within courts of law, challenges towards witnesses are played down through using questions and working up the witnesses' shortcomings across several turns, rather than directly within one turn (Atkinson and Drew, 1979).

The characteristics of challenges outlined above are also attended to by the interaction partners in ways that contribute to keeping interactions smooth. For example, Clayman and Heritage (2002) show how the use of footing by journalists when formulating challenges is generally tacitly accepted by interviewees, who respond to the challenges without questioning the journalists' role in making them. Similarly, Atkinson and Drew (1979) found that witnesses responded to the Counsel's questions in ways that avoided any hint of conflict, despite being challenged by the Counsel. The data used by Atkinson and Drew (1979) to illustrate this examined instances in which the aim of witnesses' accounts was to counter the presupposition that they should and could have taken an alternative course of action (e.g. taken action against the rioters). In examining such instances, Atkinson and Drew (1979) found that excuses and justifications followed questions that did not directly accuse the witness (e.g. questions about whether the witness had seen a particular event). This reflects the witness' recognition that the Counsel's questions are leading to blame (e.g. for not having taken action in relation to the event), and the witness' desire to mitigate such blame. A further finding was that witnesses justify their part in events by descriptions of the scene (e.g. 'we were under gunfire at the time') instead of directly disagreeing with the negative implications of the preceding questions. As suggested by Atkinson and Drew (1979), this strategy allows witnesses to avoid two potentially negative implications of the way in which the challenges are made. Firstly, it allows the avoidance of self-blame. Secondly, by deflecting attention away from matters where blame could potentially be allocated, this strategy allows

witnesses to avoid the interactional difficulties of disagreeing with the information in the prior question.

The parliamentary committee context used for the present study provides a wealth of interesting features for examining the interaction between ministers and committee members in relation to challenges. In particular, unlike broadcast news interviews or courts of law, where those formulating the challenges and those being challenged can be seen as belonging to different groups (e.g. journalists vs. politicians), in the present context ministers and committee members are in many ways colleagues. Ministers are initially elected as MSPs in the same way as the committee members, and are only later appointed as ministers. Furthermore, during Cabinet reshuffles or at elections, ministers are stripped of their ministerial roles and return to serving as committee members themselves. Indeed, some of the committee members featured in the following extracts had at some point served as ministers themselves.

Based on the above considerations, the present chapter will focus on how parliamentary committee members formulate challenges towards ministers within the context of parliamentary committee meetings, and the ways in which ministers counter such challenges. In doing so, I will pay close attention to the ways in which speakers attend to the interactional difficulties of formulating and responding to challenges.

### **Analytic procedure**

The analysis presented in this chapter was developed from a collection of extracts in which the committee members confronted ministers with challenges (identified based on ministers attending to committee members' utterances as such), and the ministers responded. In undertaking the initial analysis, I was struck by the indirectness in some of the committee members' utterances and the ministers' responses. Given the exclusive focus of the ministerial accountability literature on the adversarial nature of Parliament, which would suggest that challenges would be made and responded to directly and abruptly, I decided to investigate this issue further. I also noted that the way in which the ministers responded to challenges depended on the ways in which the committee members formulated the challenges. I



therefore decided to organise the findings around the way in which the challenges were put forward.

## 5.1 Posing a challenge by using what the minister said

I will begin by examining several instances in which committee members use something the minister had said as the basis for a challenge. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 1

The first part of this extract was previously presented in chapter 4 as extract 6. The term ‘Business Gateway’ relates to a governmental body that provides advice and support to Scottish businesses. The question relates to the minister’s announcement about the restructuring of the Business Gateway.

EETC 05/12/07:10; 01:08:33-01:09:25

DW is David Whitton (Labour MSP); JS is John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth)

1. DW: You’ve just said that there’s still discussions
2. to be hhhel- held on .hh where the >sort of<
3. central management of the Business Gateway’s gonna be
4. whether it’s Scottish Enterprise or local authorities
5. an’ you also say you want consistency an’ quality (.)
6. .hhh well (.) >I mean< if you don’t yet know
7. where the central fun<sup>↑</sup>ction’s gonna be
8. why on earth<sup>↑</sup> are you breaking up<sup>↑</sup> the Business Gateway
9. and sending it out to thirty-two local authorities.
10. JS: .hhhh Well I- (.) wh::at- what I’m- what I’m- what I’m doing is
11. I’m- (.) .hh providing local authorities with the: uh responsibility
12. for the management of: uh the local delivery of contracts↓
13. which are provided on a .hh multi-council basis↓
14. u:h around about different parts of Scotland↓
15. and (.) .hh the rea<sup>↑</sup>son for that is to: um (.) involve local authorities
16. more (.) .h clearly and with greater proximity
17. in the: uh delivery of local business development services
18. .hh in every part of Scotland.

## Extract 2

This question relates to the closure of a number of Business Gateway offices.

EETC, 07/11/07:7; 00:22:40-00:23:16

DW is David Whitton (Labour MSP); JS is John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth)

1. DW: You say you don't want to have offices
2. where people aren't using them
3. but they were using the Kirkintilloch office↓ (.)
4. .hh uh it was h(hhhh)u the most heavily used
5. of the five in the area, and now it's closed down↓
6. JS: Mhm↓ (.) well the- there were um:- (0.2). about three years ago,
7. there were fifty-four Business Gateway outlets↓ (.) uhm in May
8. when the government came to office .hh there were thirty-nine↓
9. .hh uhm a:nd (.) the new contract that has been arranged u:h
10. w- will reduce those number of outlets .hh uh to thirty-six↓ (.)
11. .h so I think the- the- the >you know<
12. there's a pattern (.) emerging there of the- the use of the offices↓

## Extract 3

The first part of this extract was previously presented in chapter 4 as extract 7. The 'Graduate Endowment Fee' is the fee payable by Scottish students after graduating, when earning an income above a certain threshold. This extract relates to the SNP Government's decision to abolish the Graduate Endowment Fee.

ELLCC 28/11/07:11; 00:11:25-00:12:03

KW is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. KW: Minister you highlighted a number of quotes
2. when you suggested that. students u:m
3. .hh had enjoyed university but. dropped out
4. becau::se .hh um they didn't have any mo↑ney.
5. .hh um if they didn't have any money
6. while undertaking their cou↑rse
7. .hh how is abolish(hhh)ing the Graduate Endowment
8. going to improve .hh the amount of money
9. they have whilst undertaking education?
10. FH: Well f- fear of debt and- in applying to university
11. in the first place is our main concern↓
12. I think that's- that's an issue↓
13. .hh clearly abolishing the Graduate Endowment Fee

14. .hh um has an impact for those >that are< graduating
15. because it's obviously on graduating-
16. on graduation you become liable↓

#### Extract 4

The term 'dossier' relates to specific issues (e.g. climate change) that would be prioritised by the Scottish Government in the context of interactions with the European Union.

EERC 18/09/07:4; 02:33:11-02:34:06

JB is Jackie Baillie (Labour MSP and Convenor of EERC); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JB: I note that you said earlier that there was
2. considerable discussion in the government about (.)
3. .hh what the current EU priorities should be:: (.)
4. .hh and yet (.) >you know< (.) twenty
5. out of twenty-one of the dossiers, (.)
6. .hh are those of the pre↑vious administration. (.)
7. .hh and I just wonder whether you think therefore↑
8. that the previous administration (.)
9. .hh got their engagement with Europe right. (.)
10. .hh u::m >you know< and I would invite you to comment on that.
11. LF: (0.2) uh I- I certainly don't think that- that we should be
12. throwing the baby out with the bath↑water. and yes↑,
13. there was things being tracked there by the previous administration
14. that was absolutely ri↑ght that they should be tracked. (.)
15. .hh uh you'll notice that we dropped °I think°
16. three- three or four of them (.) that's because
17. they came to a natural conclu↑sion. (.) u::h so (.)
18. >I mean< what- (.) this committee always appreciated
19. knowing what the government's EU priorities were, (.)
20. .hh and that will carry on, (.) but I will say to you
21. there's a difference, (.) is that we're now putting forward
22. our political priorities as well, because we think it's fair (.)
23. u:h >you know< that the Parliament should know
24. what these are↓ (.) in our term of government.
25. so that's an addition.

In the above extracts, the committee members confront the minister with a challenge. The challenge is based on a formulation of what the minister said: 'you've just said that [...] and you also say you want' (extract 1, lines 1-5); 'you say you

don't want' (extract 2, line 1); 'you highlighted a number of quotes' (extract 3, line 1); 'you said earlier that' (extract 4, line 1).

Having provided a formulation of what the minister said, the committee members contrast the minister's prior (reported) statement with a ministerial decision. In extracts 1 and 3, the committee members accomplish this through an if-then formulation: 'if you don't yet know where the central function's gonna be [then] why on earth are you breaking up the Business Gateway' (extract 1, lines 6-8); 'if they didn't have any money while undertaking their course [then] how is abolishing [...] the Graduate Endowment going to improve [...] the amount of money they have whilst undertaking education?' (extract 3, lines 5-9). The use of questions after the 'if' part of the statement constructs the second part of the utterance as inconsistent with the first part. Furthermore, in extract 1, the expression 'why on earth' (line 8) belongs to the type of interrogatives designed to express outrage (Heritage, 2002), highlighting the problematic nature of the decision. In extracts 2 and 4, the committee members contrast the minister's statement with another state of affairs: 'you say you don't want to have offices where people aren't using them but they were using the Kirkintilloch office [...] and now it's closed down' (extract 2, lines 1-5); 'you said...there was considerable discussion in the government about what the current EU priorities should be: and yet [...] twenty out of the twenty-one of the dossiers are those of the previous administration' (extract 4, lines 1-6). The challenge is accomplished through making available particular negative inferences. In extract 2, it can be inferred that the Kirkintilloch office has been closed for no reason, as the minister's explanation (that offices were closed due to lack of use) is contrasted with the other state of affairs (that it was the most heavily used office in the area). This reasoning is highlighted through indicating that 'they were using the Kirkintilloch office' (line 3) and substantiating this statement by describing the office as 'the most heavily used of the five in the area' (lines 4-5), thereby making its closure appear inconsistent with the minister's explanation. In extract 4, the inference arising from the contrast is that the new administration is simply copying the work of the previous government. This is accomplished through indicating that twenty out of the twenty-one dossiers chosen are the same as those of the previous administration.

The challenge, then, consists of questioning the consistency between something the minister said and a particular decision. As the challenges are based on something the minister said, the ministers are careful in their answers not to invalidate their previous statement while undermining the challenge. They accomplish this by first providing an alternative construction of the situation. In extract 1, ‘what I’m doing is I’m [...] providing local authorities with [...] responsibility’ (lines 10-11) constitutes an alternative to the committee member’s suggestion that the Business Gateway is being broken up before having decided upon the location of its central function (a move that hearably represents lack of planning). The alternative construction is accomplished by making the inference available that the decision represents a deliberate effort to delegate responsibility to local authorities. In extract 2, ‘three years ago, there were fifty-four Business Gateway outlets↓ [...] when the government came to office [...] there were thirty-nine↓’ (lines 6-8) provides an alternative to the committee members’ focus on the new government’s role in the closure of Business Gateway offices. This is accomplished by indicating that there had been a sharp decrease in the number of offices *before* the present government had come into power, thereby undermining the challenge that the new government is responsible for the decrease in number of offices. In extract 3, ‘fear of debt [...] in applying to university [...] is our main concern↓’ (lines 10-11) provides an alternative construction to the committee member’s focus on those dropping out of university due to experiencing financial difficulties while studying. The minister accomplishes this by shifting the attention to perceptions of debt before applying to university. In extract 4, constructing the new government’s actions as not ‘throwing the baby out with the bath↑water’ (line 12) serves as an alternative to the committee member’s suggestion that the new government is copying the previous administration’s work. The alternative construction is therefore that the current administration is not wasting the good work already done.

Having provided an alternative construction of the situation, the ministers undermine the challenge. In extract 1, the minister presents his decision (splitting up the Business Gateway) as motivated by the desire to ‘involve local authorities [...] in the: [...] delivery of local business development services’ (lines 15-17), thereby undermining the challenge that the decision is illogical. In extract 2, the upshot ‘so

[...] there's a pattern [...] of [...] the use of the offices↓' (lines 11-12) undermines the challenge that there is no reason for the closure of the Kirkintilloch office by suggesting that the closure is a result of the pattern of use. In extract 3, 'abolishing the Graduate Endowment Fee [...] has an impact for those [...] graduating' (lines 13-14) and 'it's obviously [...] on graduation you become liable↓' (lines 15-16) both serve to undermine the challenge that the initiative proposed by the minister (abolishing the Graduate Endowment Fee) will not be effective in tackling student debt. In extract 4, the minister constructs the governing party making its political priorities clear as a novel aspect through the upshot 'so that's an addition↓' (line 25), thereby undermining the challenge that the new administration is simply copying the work of the previous government.

In some cases, committee members use ministers' previous statements to insulate their challenges against specific counter-arguments. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 5

The 'International Strategy', to which this extract relates, was the framework put forward by the Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2004 for guiding work on international issues at the broadest level.

EERC 30/10/07:6; 00:17:55-00:18:43

MC is Malcolm Chisholm (Labour MSP and Convenor of EERC); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. MC: You made (.) two: strong points uh about
2. what- what- what you would wish to be the case
3. in terms of (.) .hh u::m independence and so on:,
4. and also about relations with London
5. but (.) .hh those two apart I suppose I was wondering
6. to what extent (.) .hh th- the- the meat of the International Strategy,
7. because obviously those two issues are not really
8. .hh part of the International Strategy as originally constructed,
9. I- I really wonder (.) .hh in what significant ways
10. you feel you do differ from that original document
11. that was published in:: uh two thousand and four I think↓
12. LF: There's qui↑te a lot- a lot of documents there uh
13. an' different cooperation agreements and strategies↓
14. .hh uhm >y'know< as I said in my introduction,
15. there's↑ been good work done already that can be built upon↓ (.)

16. .hh u::m but- but there are ways we think that
17. we could focus more and do things a bit better↓

### Extract 6

This exchange relates to the SNP Government's decision to carry out a free school meals pilot. In an earlier exchange, the minister was criticised by another committee member for having allowed local authorities to send letters to parents to announce the pilot before the committee and the Parliament had voted on whether the pilot should take place.

ELCC 26/09/07:5; 00:15:57-00:16:42

ES is Elizabeth Smith (Conservative MSP); AI is Adam Ingram (Minister for Children and Early Years)

1. ES: It may well be: (.) that there are very good arguments
2. for having this (.) pilot↓ (.) .hh but at the moment
3. the point is about the proce:dures (.) by which we have (.)
4. in this case, .h not really been able to debate the issue
5. as thoroughly as we might have done↓ (.)
6. .hh and therefore I think our judgement (.)
7. u:h about whether it is a good thing or a bad thing (.)
8. .h has been slightly compromised.
9. AI: Then I can't agree with the- (.) the member↓ (.)
10. I think it's a- a sensible- (.) one- one-
11. I noticed one of the issues you were discussing last week
12. was how to involve the parents: u:h
13. in (.) .hh this sorta culture change that I was talking about↓ (.)
14. .hh and we need to do that from the- from the outset↓
15. so I think it's quite appropriate that local authorities
16. are contacting parents telling them (.)
17. .hh that this uh pilot would be coming up.

In the above extracts, the ministers' previous statements are initially acknowledged by the committee members. In extract 5, 'you made [...] two: strong points [...] about [...] independence [...] and also about relations with London' (lines 1-4) represents an acknowledgement that the minister has already made a statement relating to the question, and contains the positive evaluation 'strong points' (line 1) which is hearable as praise in relation to that statement. In extract 6, 'it may well be: [...] that there are very good arguments for having this [...] pilot↓' (lines 1-2) acknowledges the minister's previous answer while also using the conditional tense

to construct the arguments in favour of the minister's proposal (the free school meals pilot) as potentially 'very good arguments' (line 1). In both extracts, therefore, the committee members first acknowledge the minister's previous statement, and provide a positive evaluation in relation to it.

Having acknowledged the minister's previous statement, the committee members formulate the challenge. In extract 5, the challenge is accomplished by asking the minister for 'significant ways' (line 9) in which 'you feel you do differ' (line 10), the use of 'significant' (line 9) indicating that the difference between the European Strategy put forward by the new government and the one put forward by the previous administration be non-trivial. In extract 6, the committee member accomplishes the challenge by constructing the minister's actions as having led to negative consequences, such as preventing the committee from debating the issues thoroughly ('the point is about the procedures [...] by which we have [...] not really been able to debate the issue as thoroughly as we might have done↓', lines 3-5) and therefore compromising the committee's decision ('our judgement...about whether it [the pilot] is a good thing or a bad thing has been slightly compromised', lines 6-8).

By first acknowledging the minister's previous statement and then dismissing it as irrelevant while formulating a challenge, the committee members are able to insulate this challenge against particular counter-arguments. In doing so, the committee members also make the challenge less interactionally problematic. Furthermore, in extract 6, the committee member uses mildly negative words and expressions even in the challenge itself, thereby further softening it. In particular, in 'we have [...] not really been able to debate the issue as thoroughly as we might have done↓' (lines 3-5), the use of 'really' (line 4) modifies the challenge that the minister has announced the initiative for the free school meals pilot before the committee has debated it. Similarly, in 'our judgement has been [...] slightly compromised' (extract 6, lines 6-8), the use of the qualifier 'slightly' (line 8) detracts from the interactionally problematic nature of suggesting that the minister's actions have negatively impacted on the committee's discussions regarding the pilot scheme.

Ministers' previous statements, then, are used in extracts 5 and 6 to insulate those challenges from particular counter-challenges, while a range of devices are used to soften the interactionally problematic nature of the challenge. The minister's



responses, focusing on defending the actions taken, also attempt to make the defence less interactionally problematic. This is accomplished in different ways across the two extracts. In extract 5, the minister minimises the interactionally problematic nature of providing a defence by suggesting in lines 12-13 that the strategy is composed of more than one document. This makes the inference available that the committee member's question is based on an incorrect premise (there being only one document), thereby undermining the challenge without the need for expressing disagreement. In extract 6, the minister attends to the interactionally problematic nature of his defence through the indirect rebuttal 'I can't agree' (line 9), which implies 'I disagree' while removing the agency for the disagreement away from the minister. Furthermore, the use of 'then' (line 9) to introduce the disagreement constructs it as a consequence of what the committee member said, further exculpating the minister. The rest of the minister's answer is also focused on making the disagreement less interactionally problematic. The minister accomplishes this by constructing his procedure (challenged by the committee member) as 'a sensible [...] one' (line 10). The minister substantiates this characterisation of the procedure by constructing his actions as responding to the committee's previous discussion on 'how to involve the parents' (line 12). The minister thereby constructs his actions (sending letters to parents) as an upshot of and as a solution to the committee's previous discussion about how to involve parents: 'so [...] it's quite appropriate that local authorities are contacting parents' (lines 15-16). Furthermore, by attributing the action of sending the letters to local authorities, the minister removes the focus away from himself as having authorised the action of sending the letters. This serves to construct the characterisation 'it's quite appropriate' (line 15) in relation to sending the letters as a defence of local authorities' action rather than of his authorisation of this action, thereby making the defence less interactionally problematic.

Overall then, in this section I examined instances in which the committee members pose challenges to the ministers. These challenges include ministers' previous statements. In extracts 1 to 4, the ministers' (reported) previous statements are used to construct the ministers' decisions as inconsistent with their statements. However, as illustrated by extracts 5 and 6, the ministers' previous statements can also be used to insulate challenges against potential counter-challenges. This

different way in which the challenges are posed is associated, in these extracts, with ministers responding to the challenges in different ways. In relation to the first set of challenges (extracts 1 to 4), where the challenges use what the minister said as the premise, the ministers are careful not to invalidate their previous statement while defending their decision. The ministers accomplish this by constructing an alternative state of affairs to the one proposed by the committee members before undermining the challenge. In relation to the second set of challenges (extracts 5 and 6), where the ministers' previous statements are acknowledged and then dismissed as irrelevant to the challenges, the ministers defend their actions without referring to their previous statement. In both sets of extracts, the ministers use a range of features to make their defences less interactionally problematic. In particular, in extract 5, the minister avoids disagreement altogether by undermining the premise of the question. Furthermore, while expressing disagreement with the challenge in extract 6, the minister uses a range of features to soften his defence, both in the way in which he formulates the disagreement itself, as well as through the rest of his answer.

## 5.2 Posing a challenge through question design

Another way in which committee members pose challenges to ministers is through the design of their questions. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 7

This extract follows an exchange in which ES indicates that there are concerns about the Scottish higher education lagging behind the English education system due to the introduction of increased funding through top-up fees in England, and the minister answering that she intends to wait and see how things develop in England.

ELLCC, 28/11/07:11; 00:19:37-00:20:40

ES is Elizabeth Smith (Conservative MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. ES: Do you accept that many in the university (.) uh sector (.)
2. .hh find that a little difficult to accept
3. that it was a wait and see situation,
4. they want this problem addressed now↓ (.)
5. .hh u:m because they feel obviously that there are problems

6. that we have to address now (.) .hh uh for ten,  
7. twenty years down the line.  
8. FH: No↓ I think- I think the issue on participation rates  
9. is not one that u:m the- the universities have identified  
10. to me as a concern in relation to: (.) uh  
11. income (.) provision down South (.)  
12. I think where they're more concerned  
13. is probably (.) .hh if you think about it down South the-  
14. .hh the- the age profile u:m in England is different  
15. than Scotland (.) that there's an increasing (.) profile uh of:-  
16. of population trend, (.) whereas in Scotland  
17. we've got a re- reduction (.) .hhh and the challenges  
18. that we have for (.) our universities in particular is with-  
19. .hh u:m with falling school rolls (.)  
20. um where are- uh where the future cohort are gonna come from↓ (.)  
21. .hh and I think that's why (.) work in encouraging  
22. older um students to return uh into education (.)  
23. .hh and indeed for part-time students to come into- (.) to universities  
24. I think is- is an area that we need to discuss  
25. and develop with the sector and is one that I intend to do so,  
26. and have already started doing↓

### Extract 8

This extract follows shortly after the interaction in extract 6 and also relates to the free school meals pilot. In response to a previous question regarding recruitment of participants in the pilot, the minister had answered that the parents would be asked to put themselves forward for taking part in the pilot.

ELLCC 26/09/07:5; 00:26:57-00:28:08

MM is Mary Mulligan (Labour MSP); AI is Adam Ingram (Minister for Children and Early Years)

1. MM: Do you not↑ think there's some reason for concern  
2. that .hh it may be .hh u:m (.) that some parents  
3. who have more time, and u:m are more u:m (.) vocal  
4. will- >will put themselves forward< and actually maybe  
5. some of the more vul↑nerable children whose parents  
6. don't have the time and the: .hh facility to get involved  
7. won't↑, and we won't necessarily learn  
8. the lessons we might be loo↑king for?=  
9. AI: =No uh uhm I don't- I don't accept that uh we've-  
10. as I say we've got a- a- a fairly detailed research brief put out,  
11. the: company- the research organisation that uh .hhh uh  
12. we've commissioned uh:m ha:s (.) a >very good track< record,  
13. .h we're going to undertake- in addition to a general uh:m sweep

14. of: parents' views .hh and pupils' views
15. .hh uh ten intensive case studies of individual schools .hh u:m
16. and u:h I >daresay< uh every parent will be approached
17. uh in those particular case studies (.)
18. .hh uh to participate↓ (.) or respond↓
19. to the questions that are being asked.

### Extract 9

This exchange also relates to the free school meals pilot referred to in extracts 6 and 8. Before this exchange, the minister had announced that letters had already been sent to parents announcing that they would be eligible to take part in the pilot.

ELCC 26/09/07:5; 00:10:06-00:11:41

KW is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELCC); AI is Adam Ingram (Minister for Children and Early Years)

1. KW: Is it not a little bit prematu↑re
2. for those letters to have been issued, (.)
3. .hh when this matter (.) .h has not been given
4. parliamentary approval indeed .hh u:m the matter
5. is only come before the committee
6. .hh u:m this mo↑rning↓ (.) .hh um for us to vote on at
7. and then full Parliament will have to vote u:m again
8. .hh uh and it seems to me: that .hh u:m Parliament is um
9. being u:m ridden >roughshod over< (.)
10. .hh and it's not acce↑ptable .hh u:m
11. that we are not given our place to scrus-tinise
12. .hh the: legislative proposals of the-
13. the Government↑ in this regard.
14. AI: (.0.3) Well ((clears throat)) well I-
15. I would have to disagree with you Convenor there↓
16. .hh we're not pre-judging the decision o:f this committee
17. or indeed Parliament (.) but u::m u:h
18. there is a lead-ed- uh lead-in time necessary uh for-
19. to make the arrangements for any trial and uh >to be honest<
20. we can't just switch it on and off like a switch (.)
21. so: it's only sensible that we make appropriate arrangements
22. for local authorities to- .hh to launch the trial
23. after the October break, as uh we indicated uh to you
24. that- that we wanted to do.

## Extract 10

This exchange follows a series of interactions in which JB asks the minister about what consultation was undertaken with stakeholders in deciding on the Government's EU priorities, and the minister answers that government officials are always keen to engage with stakeholders.

EERC, 18/09/07:4; 02:39:32-02:40:00

JB is Jackie Baillie (Labour MSP and Convenor of EERC); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JB: I would hate to think↑ (.) um,
2. and I'm sure you're not suggesting this,
3. that it's just left (.) .hh as a matter of course
4. to (.) whoever the portfolio officials are, (.)
5. but that there is a focus brought to this. =
6. LF: =Of course there's a focus.
7. I mean can I say to you. (.)
8. >you know<, three months down the line (.)
9. from a new government coming into operation
10. I'm actually quite pleased↑ at
11. how we've addressed this issue. (.)
12. .hh and how we've been able to (.) speak to stakeholders,
13. and come to committee (.) .hh and say
14. this is how we've been open,
15. and transparent, (.) and plea:::se, (.) consult with us.

As in the previous section, in extracts 7 to 10 the committee members confront the minister with a challenge. In extract 7, the challenge is accomplished through the use of the indirect contrast between 'it was a wait and see situation' (line 3) and 'they want this problem addressed now↓' (line 4), which constructs the minister's attitude as reactive rather than proactive, and therefore as problematic. In extract 8, the challenge is accomplished by outlining a negative possibility through 'there's some reason for concern' (line 1) and 'we won't necessarily learn the lessons we might be loo↑king for' (lines 7-8). In extract 9, the challenge is accomplished through the use of the mildly negative 'is it not [...] prematu↑re' (line 1) and through constructing the consequences of the minister's actions as negative: 'parliament is [...] being [...] ridden >roughshod over<' (lines 8-9). In extract 10, the use of 'as a matter of course' (line 3) and 'whoever' (line 4) in 'left [...] as a matter of course to whoever the

portfolio officials are' (lines 3-4) suggests lack of planning on the part of the government through things being left to chance, similarly to the use of 'wait and see' (line 3) in extract 7.

There are two observations I would like to make in relation to the above challenges. The first observation is that in each of these, the committee members make it difficult for the minister to reject the challenge. They accomplish this by using questions with specific grammatical features. In extract 7, the committee member frames the challenge as a request for confirmation: 'do you accept that' (line 1). In extract 8, the committee member uses a negatively framed question: 'do you not↑ think' (line 1). The grammatical design of this question indicates preference for an affirmative answer, thereby making a disagreement (requiring a negative answer) interactionally problematic (Heritage, 2002). In extract 10, the expression 'I would hate to think↑' (line 1) is used to introduce possible undesirable consequences. According to Billig (1996), disclaimers such as 'I would hate to think' make available rhetorical alternatives (e.g. I think), implying that what is being negated is in fact a possibility.

The second observation is that the committee members' challenges are characterised by indirectness. This is accomplished through the use of a range of features. In extract 8, 'some reason for concern' (line 1) is a mild way of referring to something as problematic. In the same extract, 'we won't necessarily learn the lessons we might be loo↑king for' (lines 7-8) uses the qualifier 'necessarily' (line 7) to focus the complaint on an unwelcome possibility rather than an impending certainty. In extract 9, 'a little bit prematu↑re' (line 1) is a mild way of assessing the minister's actions as premature, while 'it seems to me:' (line 8) softens the assertion that parliament is being ridden roughshod over by framing it as subjective. In extract 10, 'I'm sure you're not suggesting this' (line 2) is a modifying term used to mitigate the undesirable consequences implied by 'I would hate to think↑' (line 1). Through the use of mild terms and modifying features, the committee members soften the challenging character of their utterances.

The committee members' challenges, then, are grammatically designed to make it interactionally difficult for the ministers to reject them, while their challenging character is softened through a range of features. The ministers attend to the

challenging nature of the committee members' utterances by expressing disagreement: 'no↓' (extract 7, line 8); 'no [...] I don't accept that' (extract 8, line 9); 'I would have to disagree with you' (extract 9, line 15); 'of course there's a focus' (extract 10, line 6). However, the ministers also attend to the interactionally problematic nature of expressing disagreement. In extract 7, the minister accomplishes this by constructing the committee member's question ('do you accept that', line 1) as a straightforward yes/no question, and answering this question in the negative. The minister also accompanies the initial 'no↓' (line 8) with an account: 'the issue on participation rates is not one that [...] the universities have identified to me as a concern' (lines 8-10). The account serves to soften the directness of the initial 'no↓' (line 8). In extract 8, the use of fillers ('uh uhm', line 7), the repair ('I don't- I don't', line 7), and the subjective nature of the verb 'to accept' in 'no uh uhm I don't- I don't accept that' (line 7) all contribute to detract from the directness of expressing disagreement. Similarly, in extract 9, 'I would have to disagree' (line 15) avoids the problematic directness of 'I disagree' through the use of the conditional tense and 'to have' (implying lack of agency in expressing disagreement). In extract 10, the minister constructs the committee member's desire that there be focus to the process of consultation with stakeholders as a reality: 'there's a focus' (line 6). Furthermore, the minister strengthens this construction of reality through 'of course' (line 6), which indicates that this state of affairs is common sense.

Having expressed disagreement with the challenge while attending to the interactionally problematic aspects of doing so, the ministers undermine the challenge. In extract 7, the minister undermines the premise of the challenge by constructing the situation as one in which the universities are more concerned with falling school rolls than with funding. Furthermore, the minister indicates that she is already tackling the school rolls situation, thereby attending to the implication (hearable in the challenge) that she is not taking a pro-active approach. The minister accomplishes the latter by reformulating 'one that I intend to do' (line 25) into 'have already started doing↓' (line 26), thereby indicating that she is taking initiative. In extract 8, 'every parent will be approached [...] in those particular case studies' (lines 16-17) uses the extreme case formulation 'every parent' (line 16) (Pomerantz,

1986) to reject the possibility that the research findings will be compromised by unrepresentative sampling. Furthermore, the minister uses a number of modifying terms to emphasise the care taken in commissioning the research: ‘a fairly detailed research brief’ (line 10); ‘a >very good track< record’ (line 12); ‘ten intensive case studies’ (line 15). In addition, the repair from ‘the: company’ (line 11) to ‘the research organisation’ (line 11) serves to bolster the research credentials of those undertaking this research. In extract 9, ‘we’re not pre-judging the decision o:f this committee or indeed parliament’ (lines 16-17), following the committee member’s utterance that the letters had been sent prematurely, rejects the criticism that this is the case. The minister also defends the actions taken by using a range of devices designed to persuade a sceptical audience. The extreme case formulation ‘any trial’ (line 19) makes the minister’s argument (about the need for a lead-in time) persuasive by constructing his actions as customary and therefore not requiring an explanation. Within the same extract, the expression ‘we can’t just switch it [the pilot] on and off like a switch’ (line 20)’ uses the deprecatory ‘just’(Lee, 1987) as well as the simile ‘like a switch’ (line 20) to construct an alternative to his action (i.e. not introducing a lead-in time, or introducing it in a short space of time) as unrealistic. Finally, the minister defends the actions taken through the upshot ‘so: it’s only sensible that we make appropriate arrangements for local authorities [...] to launch the trial’ (lines 21-22). The use of an upshot serves to construct its content as a logical conclusion to what he had previously said, thereby making it persuasive. In extract 10, the minister undermines the challenge by attending to the implication of lack of planning on the part of the government in undertaking the process of consultation. The minister accomplishes this through assessing the progress made as positive: ‘three months down the line [...] from a new government coming into operation I’m actually quite pleased↑ at how we’ve addressed this issue’ (lines 8-11). The use of ‘actually’ (line 10) serves to undermine the committee member’s challenge through an alternative state of affairs, implied by the positive assessment ‘I’m [...] quite pleased↑’ (line 10). The minister substantiates this alternative state of affairs through the use of two three-part lists (Jefferson, 1990). The first list enumerates the positive actions the new government has undertaken: ‘we’ve been able to [...] speak to stakeholders, and come to committee [...] and say’ (lines 12-



13). The list enumerates a range of actions while not providing details, using vagueness to make the claims to action hard to contest (Potter, 1996). The second three-part list ('this is how we've been open, and transparent, [...] and plea:::se, [...] consult with us', lines 14-15) serves to make the attributes being listed (being open, transparent, and consultative) generalise to all government actions. This counters the challenge that the consultation is being carried out haphazardly by suggesting that the government is taking a pro-active and open approach in carrying it out.

Through first expressing disagreement with the challenge before undermining it, the ministers make an alternative state of affairs persuasive. However, expressing disagreement is interactionally problematic. As I have shown, the ministers attend to this characteristic of expressing disagreement by using a variety of features (e.g. delays; modifying features) to making it appear less direct.

An alternative way of responding to the type of challenges examined so far in this section (i.e. utterances using grammatical features to indicate preference) is to avoid expressing disagreement altogether, as shown below in extracts 11 and 12:

### Extract 11

This extract relates to the SNP Government's decision to abolish the Graduate Endowment Fee, a fee payable by Scottish students upon graduation.

ELLCC 28/1/07:11; 01:07:01-01:07:50

ES is Elizabeth Smith (Conservative MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. ES: Might it have been better
2. to have a look at the other alternatives, (.)
3. .h do a little co- cost-benefit analysis
4. of these alternatives against this particular one
5. which you obviously decided is (.) .hh uh the better policy↓ (.)
6. .hh uh would it have been better uh to-
7. to have gone through (.) that policy (.) u:m strategy first↓ (.)
8. before (.) saying that this is definitely the one
9. that you think (.) .hh is the right one↓
10. FH: (.) I think you could argue that↑,
11. and I think it's o- open to the co- committee to-
12. to take a view on that,
13. however↓ had we done that, then uh: (.)
14. >there would have been< about (.) over ten thousand (.)
15. .hh um students that would have benefited this year (.)

16. would not have benefited, (.)
17. those that graduated this summer (.)
18. .hh would not have been able to benefit from the- (.)
19. the legislation we're bringing in,
20. so↓ .hh we were very (.) very clear
21. that we wanted to make sure we could maximise
22. the number of those that could benefit (.)
23. .hh from the abolition of the Graduate Endowment Fee.

## Extract 12

The term 'local enterprise company' refers to 22 local organisations set up by the previous (Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition) Government and aiming to encourage economic activity throughout Scotland. This extract relates to the SNP Government's decision to replace these 22 local enterprise companies with 5 regional operations, each with their own business-led regional advisory board.

EETC, 07/11/07:7; 00:53:37-00:55:13

LM is Lewis Macdonald (Labour MSP); JS is John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth)

1. LM: Do you sh- do you recognise the concerns that (.)
2. .h removing that corporate responsibility from uh
3. >people active in local businesses<
4. .h may well change (.) their relationship to the (.)
5. wider objectives of the enterprise network=
6. =in other words (.) .hh the risk that an advisory board
7. will simply be (.) u:h a place where people articulate
8. the interests of their own company or their own sector,
9. .h and that collective responsibility
10. for (.) the growth of the local economy may be lost.
11. JS: I think- I think if that was a concern
12. about the regional advisory boards
13. it would also have been a concern
14. about local enterprise companies to be honest about it↓ that (.)
15. um >you know< if- if- if- if we think that people
16. go into these boards (.) .hh uh to pursue
17. their own company interests, well, (.)
18. that's what- that- yeah- (.) I- I don't think
19. that's what people do (.) uh to be honest I think- (.)
20. .hh my experience of local enterprise companies
21. uh of certainly- .hh uh a very constructive discussion I had
22. with the local enterprise company chairs
23. .hh uh before I made my announcement,
24. .hh uh (.) was that these were individuals who:
25. shared the Government's determination

26. to make the economy more successful (.)  
27. and wanted to do their bit to make it happen↓

As in extracts 7 to 10, in extracts 11 and 12 the committee members pose a challenge using questions with particular grammatical features. The use of these grammatical features makes it interactionally difficult for the minister to reject the challenge. In extract 11, the use of the conditional tense in ‘might it have been better’ (line 1) makes it problematic for the minister to express disagreement. In extract 12, the question ‘do you recognise the concerns’ (line 1) shows preference for an affirmative answer through ‘recognise’ (line 1) indicating pre-existence. Furthermore, asking the question in the first place implies that there is a problem.

An important characteristic of the above challenges is that the committee members in these extracts propose an alternative to the government’s proposal. In extract 11, the use of the conditional tense (‘might it have been better’, line 1) introduces the possibility that instead of the action chosen (i.e. proposing the abolition of the Graduate Endowment Fee), the government should have taken an alternative action (i.e. providing a range of policy options). In extract 12, the committee member uses a negative characterisation of the model proposed by the minister: ‘an advisory board will simply be [...] a place where people articulate the interests of their own company or their own sector’ (lines 6-8). This negative characterisation is strengthened through ‘simply’ (line 7) serving the same function as the deprecatory ‘just’ (Lee, 1987), implying that the only function of the new model will be for participants to articulate their own interests. The committee member thereby indirectly constructs the model being replaced as a superior alternative to the new model proposed by the government, due to its focus on encouraging participants to act for the common good.

In responding to the committee members’ challenges, the ministers use a range of devices to avoid disagreement with the committee members’ alternatives while undermining them. In extract 11, the use of ‘you could argue that↑’ (line 10) and ‘I think it’s [...] open to the [...] committee [...] to take a view on that’ (lines 11-12) suggests the existence of another perspective and therefore the possibility of disagreement. Furthermore, the use of the conditional past tense (‘had we done that’, line 13) indicates that an alternative behaviour would have been possible, while ‘over

ten thousand [...] students [...] would not have benefited' (lines 13-16) undermines this alternative by suggesting that it would have had negative consequences. Furthermore, the minister states that the government's goal was to 'maximise the number of those that could benefit' (lines 21-22). This serves to construct the alternative (proposing several policy options and therefore delaying the abolition of the Graduate Endowment Fee) as inconsistent with that goal, thereby undermining it further. In extract 12, the minister uses an if-then formulation to undermine the alternative: 'if that was a concern about the regional advisory boards [then] it would also have been a concern about local enterprise companies' (lines 11-14). The first part of the if-then clause acknowledges the possibility of a concern, but undermines it as hypothetical using the conditional tense. In addition, the second part of the if-then clause undermines the previous model by suggesting that it cannot be negatively compared to the previous way of doing things. The minister also attends to the challenge itself by starting another if-then statement ('if we think', line 15) in relation to the possibility that the new model encourages business owners' self-interest, but leaving the sentence unfinished with an ambiguous 'yeah' (line 18), which can be taken as a dismissal of this possibility. The dismissal is reinforced through the suggestion that 'these [the company chairs] were individuals who: shared the government's determination to make the economy more successful [...] and wanted to do their bit to make it happen.' (lines 24-27). This undermines the challenge that the new model will lead to self-interested behaviour at the expense of pursuing common goals.

Overall then, in this section I examined extracts in which committee members posed challenges to the ministers in a way that made it internationally problematic for the minister to disagree. In examining these challenges, I also pointed out the ways in which they were made to appear indirect. The ministers attended to these features of the challenges in two ways. In the first set of extracts, ministers expressed disagreement in an indirect way, and used a range of features to make their disagreement interactionally acceptable. In the second set of extracts, where the challenges consisted of alternatives to the governments' initiatives, the ministers avoided expressing disagreement while indirectly undermining the committee members' alternatives.

### 5.3 Posing a challenge by making complaints

Making complaints about the consequences of the ministers' actions constitutes another way in which committee members confront ministers with challenges.

Consider the following extracts:

#### Extract 13

The term 'JMC' relates to Joint Ministerial Committee, an over-arching body set up by the UK Government to provide a forum where ministers from the UK Government and the devolved administrations can discuss issues that concern all four UK territories. The JMC to which this extract relates is the JMC on Europe, where the issues under discussion relate to the UK's involvement with the European Union. This extract was recorded shortly after the minister had indicated in response to a previous question that she is not yet able to present the SNP Government's EU priorities to the committee before presenting these at the JMC meeting.

EERC, 18/09/07:4; 02:14:01-02:16:29

JB is Jackie Baillie (Labour MSP and Convenor of EERC); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JB: Before I bring anybody else just say Minister
2. that- that certainly in previous discussions (.)
3. .hh u::m we were ve:ry conscious
4. of the short time-scale of the presentation of (.)
5. .hh the Government's (.) u:m EU priorities to the committee, (.)
6. .hh and indeed the- the forthcoming JMC on Europe. (.)
7. .hh on that basis we had an agreement
8. with your officials and yourself (.)
9. .hh u:m that you would be able to answer the detail (.)
10. of each of the current priorities. (.)
11. so, .hh I have to record my disappointment for the-
12. the benefit of the committee, (.)
13. .hh that (.) a lot of information will be passed back (.)
14. .hh to:::, (.) you know (.) whoever the portfolio holder is. (.)
15. >I just think< it's an opportunity missed for the committee (.)
16. .hh to engage meaningfully, as you want us to do, (.)
17. .hh in agreeing joint priorities.
- (02:14:43-02:15:55 missing, in which another member asks an unrelated question)
18. LF: Uh >I mean< I think everyone can take on board that
19. obviously the timescales were always going to be difficult (.)
20. .hh uh for the first time that we came
21. .hh with our EU priorities. (.) .hh because they have to:

22. go through cabinet, (.) and through a::ll the different ministers
23. u:m whose portfolios involve these issues. (.)
24. .hh it's not me who sets the timescale
25. for the JMC Europe meetings. (.)
26. .hh uh s(hh)o that's something I had to work to=
27. =we've tried ve:ry hard (.) .hh to get things to you in time=
28. =I'll also pledge that any detailed questions (.)
29. .hh you come back with today, (.) will be quickly
30. passed on to (.) cabinet secretaries and- and ministers
31. for response. (.) .hh so that if there is agreement (.)
32. they could be considered (.) u::h for (.)
33. >you know< further discussion. (.) prior to the JMCE.

#### Extract 14

Previous to this exchange, another committee member (Jeremy Purvis) had asked the minister for specific targets for the SNP Government's plans to reduce the number of pupils in P1 to P3 (primary 1 to primary 3) classes across Scotland down to eighteen. In replying to his question, the minister had assessed Jeremy Purvis' tone in asking the question as negative.

ELLCC, 27/06/07:2; 01:59:43-02:00:28

KM is Ken Macintosh (Labour MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. KM: I think it's (.) a bit unfair of- of >Fiona Hyslop< to-
2. to call Jeremy Purvis' >and others'< questions negative (.)
3. .hh >I mean< I think all members of the committee
4. have welcomed (.) the direction of travel↓ (.) .hh but (.)
5. there is a need for (.) greater- greater clarity here↓ (.)
6. .hh either it's a target (.) or it's not (.)
7. coz the trouble with saying (.) .hh it's all common sense
8. is that common sense varies unfortunately
9. from individual to individual↓ (.)
10. .hh and can I↑ ask the minister
11. to come back at some point to this committee (.)
12. with an exact- (.) uh with a >more< exact (.) definition
13. of what she means by flexibility (.)
14. .hh and what that- (.) what that actually means in terms of
15. the uh power of head teachers (.) to vary (.) the class size target (.)
16. an' I think it's very important in terms of (.) uh
17. our committee's scrutiny over this government's actions↓ (.)
18. so far (.) you've (.) given us (.) a target
19. >that's no longer a target< because it's flexible (.)
20. and you've also said that it's totally uncosted↓ (.)
21. now (.) I- I have to say at this stage that's quite unsatisfactory↓
22. now I'm quite willing to wait

23. until the (.) comprehensive spending review  
 24. but you must understand that is unsatisfactory↓ (.)  
 25. .hh and that (.) .hh >you know<  
 26. in areas like mine and like yours,  
 27. if I may say so (.) West Lothian↓ (.)  
 28. .hh uh many parents, (.) many parents  
 29. would r- rather have a larger class size  
 30. in a school that they can get into (.)  
 31. .h than a class size of eighteen↓ (.)  
 32. now that's a >fair (.) demand< from the parents↓ but is that  
 33. what we're actually saying is- is going to be allowed  
 34. because (.) that is what parents would like to see  
 35. in terms of common sense approach in some areas (.)  
 36. but I'm not sure that's what you think is  
 37. common [sense ]  
 38. FH: [Well (.)] I- I said repeatedly  
 39. that (.) I have to work with councils in the delivery of this↓ (.)  
 40. because obviously they're the local authorities  
 41. that uh administer schools and- and- are obviously the-  
 42. employ the teachers that we (.) need in order to  
 43. cut the class sizes

### Extract 15

This exchange relates to the SNP Government's decision to reorganise the Business Gateway. As part of this reorganisation, several Business Gateway offices are due to be closed.

EETC, 07/11/07:7; 00:21:01-00:22:22

DW is David Whitton (Labour MSP); JS is John Swinney (Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth)

1. DW: I've asked questions in parliament before  
 2. about the organisa- the reorganisation of Business Gateway  
 3. and how it applies to my own consti↑tuency↓ (.)  
 4. .hhh and it doesn't seem to be much cohesion there↓ (.)  
 5. .hh u:h because there were five Business Gateway offices, (0.2)  
 6. .hh u:h in my area, and now there's only one,  
 7. and it's not in my consti↑tuency↓ (.)  
 8. I don't have a Business Gateway office↓ (.)  
 9. .hh u:h you're gonna open a >sort of< virtual office,  
 10. somewhere in Kirkintilloch↓ (.) .hhh u:h a-  
 11. that doesn't seem to me to be uh greater cohesion.  
 12. JS: (0.2) uhm the- well ((shuffling papers)) let me just (.)  
 13. say in terms of the: uhm (.) th-  
 14. the Business Gateway, Mister Whitton,

15. that the- the .hh one of the patterns of: use  
 16. of Business Gateway services (.) and uh >y'kn<  
 17. which (.) is happening is that people are more readily using (.)  
 18. .hh web-based access to services (.) rather than (.) uhm (.)  
 19. using offices↓ uhm (.) bluntly↓  
 20. .hh uhm now that's not a pattern that's just happened  
 21. over the past coupla months,  
 22. that's been going on for (.) some considerable time (.)  
 23. .hh where uhm businesses are accessing  
 24. .hh more of the business advice services  
 25. by web-based access .hh than they are  
 26. by going into the Business Gateway premises↓ (.)  
 27. .hhh uh so there's been (.) u:m in a sense  
 28. the .hh arrangements in terms of delineation of the offices .hh uh  
 29. is a product of that change in (.) the pattern by users of services↓

### Extract 16

This exchange was recorded shortly after the one presented in extract 9 (see section 5.2), in which KW had criticised the minister for prejudging the decision of the committee in relation to the free school meals pilot by sending letters to the parents to announce the pilot. The minister had defended his actions by suggesting that they had not represented a prejudgement.

ELCC 26/09/07:5; 00:13:31-00:14:46

KW is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELCC); AI is Adam Ingram (Minister for Children and Early Years)

1. KW: Minister you have prejudged (.)  
 2. .hh because the parents of the children  
 3. who are eligible .hh have received letters  
 4. advising them .h of their eligibility (.)  
 5. .hh and they're not eligible at this point in time  
 6. .hh because the Parliament (.) .hh and this committee (.)  
 7. .hh have not been given the opportunity (.)  
 8. .hh to reach that decision↑ (.) .h and you yourself said  
 9. in responding to one of my previous questions  
 10. .hh that should the Parliament choose  
 11. not to approve this .hh u:m proposal  
 12. .hh that you- that those parents would be written to  
 13. advising them of the withdrawal of that provision↑ (.)  
 14. .hh well, (.) they don't have um an entitlement  
 15. at the moment, they have been prematurely  
 16. .hh advised of an entitlement uh uh  
 17. and u:m it was inappropriate .h to have written to parents  
 18. in advance of the Parliament considering this matter .h today



19. and the Parliament fully considering it at a later point↑  
 20. AI: (0.2) Well ((clears throat)) I- I hear  
 21. what you're saying Convenor, u:m and  
 22. I'll check the actual text of the letters  
 23. that have been issued by the local authorities to parents (.)  
 24. .hh u:m and if they've used presumptuous language  
 25. in that- in those letters then I would apologise for that,  
 26. but that was not the inten↑tion.

### Extract 17

This extract follows shortly after the one presented in extract 6 (see section 5.1), in which ES had accused the minister of having compromised the committee's judgement on the free school meals pilot by having sent out the letters to the parents, and the minister had defended his actions by suggesting that his actions were in line with the committee's earlier discussion about involving parents at an early stage.

ELCC 26/09/07:5; 00:17:26-00:18:15

ES is Elizabeth Smith (Conservative MSP); AI is Adam Ingram (Minister for Children and Early Years)

1. ES: Would you accept Minister though that uh as-  
 2. because it's such an important issue that  
 3. I think we- we were left at the end of last u:h committee (.)  
 4. .h thinking that there was still (.) some questions  
 5. that we would like answered (.) .h before we could  
 6. make a judgement as to whether this was a good or a bad thing.=  
 7. AI: =Absolutely↓=  
 8. ES: = .hh And therefore the fact that these letters have gone out=  
 9. =it would be extremely difficult (.) .h to turn round  
 10. to these parents now and say (.) sorry  
 11. this letter was inaccurate, (.) .hh we've got to withdraw it↓ (.)  
 12. .hh I mean I f- I find that (.) rather bizarre↓  
 13. AI: (0.2) Well u:h (.) huh perhaps on reflection  
 14. it might have been better to wait until after-  
 15. after uh today's meeting (.) .hh uh:m  
 16. uh I'll check that with offi↑cials (.)  
 17. .hh u:m but certainly the on- the only people  
 18. that will have e- egg on their face  
 19. are likely to be u- us in government if you-  
 20. if you do knock us back today↓

In each of the five extracts, the committee members challenge the minister in relation to particular actions. The challenge is accomplished in three ways. The first way is by constructing the minister's behaviour as problematic. In extract 13, this is accomplished by indicating that the committee had come to an agreement with the minister, and that the minister had broken this agreement (lines 7-10). In extract 14, the committee member constructs the minister's behaviour as problematic by indicating that the minister had not provided particular information (lines 20-22). In extract 15, the problematic behaviour is established by contrasting the previous with the current situation: 'there were five Business Gateway offices [...] in my area [...] now there's only one' (lines 5-6). Furthermore, the use of 'somewhere' (line 10) in 'you're gonna open a >sort of< virtual office, somewhere in Kirkintilloch↓' (lines 9-10) implies that the location of the office could be anywhere, thereby constructing the minister's replacement of the closed offices as ineffectual. In extract 16, the committee member constructs the minister's actions as problematic by implicitly contrasting 'the parents of the children who are eligible [...] have received letters advising them [...] of their eligibility' (lines 2-4) with an alternative state of affairs: 'they're not eligible at this point in time' (line 5). Through contrasting the minister's action of sending out the letters announcing eligibility with the recipients' lack of eligibility, the committee member indicates that the minister should not have sent out the letters. In extract 17, the committee member constructs the minister's actions as problematic by indicating that these actions have compromised the committee's decision. This construction is made persuasive by the extreme case formulation 'extremely difficult' (line 9) and the use of the active voice 'sorry this letter was inaccurate, [...] we've got to withdraw it↓' (lines 10-11).

The second way in which the committee members accomplish the challenge is by using negative assessments in relation to ministers' actions. Some of these assessments are expressed indirectly, enabling the committee members to attend to their own accountability. In extract 13, 'I have to record my disappointment' (line 11) constitutes a negative assessment of the minister's behaviour. This assessment uses a mild negative emotion term ('disappointment', line 11) and is emphasised by using the verb 'to have' to dismiss the possibility that making the negative assessment is a matter of choice. In extract 14, the minister's problematic behaviour

is emphasised through the use of the negative assessments ‘I have to say at this stage that’s quite unsatisfactory↓’ (line 23) and ‘you must understand that is unsatisfactory↓’ (line 26). Both of these assessments use the modal verb ‘to have’ to dismiss the possibility that making the negative assessment is a matter of choice. In extract 15, the committee member strengthens the case against the minister’s decision being ineffectual with the use of negative assessments ‘it doesn’t seem to be much cohesion there↓’ (line 4) and ‘that doesn’t seem to me to be [...] greater cohesion’ (line 11). In extract 16, the minister’s problematic behaviour is emphasised through the negative assessment ‘it was inappropriate [...] to have written to parents’ (line 17). In extract 17, the same function is served by the negative assessment ‘I find that [...] rather bizarre↓’ (line 12) in relation to the situation resulting from the minister’s actions.

The third way in which the committee members establish the challenge is by referring to negative consequences arising from ministers’ actions. In extract 13, the negative consequence is ‘an opportunity missed for the committee’ (line 15) in providing an input. In extract 14, the consequence of the minister’s problematic actions is lack of clarity over whether the policy of decreasing class sizes will deliver what constituents want. This is implied by first constructing a particular outcome (i.e. the availability of places in classrooms) as a desirable state of affairs (lines 28-33), then expressing confusion whether the policy (i.e. reducing class sizes) is aiming to achieve that desirable state of affairs (lines 34-35).

The ministers respond to committee members’ constructions of problematic behaviours by attending to issues of responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The ministers accomplish this by acknowledging the problem highlighted by the committee members. The acknowledgements begin with devices indicating that the answer is interactionally problematic. In particular, the acknowledgements contain fillers such as ‘uh’, ‘uhm’ and ‘huh’ (extracts 13, 15, 17), ‘well’ (extracts 13, 14, 15, and 16) and ‘I mean’ (extract 13, line 18); repairs (extracts 14, 15, and 16); pauses (extracts 15, 16, and 17); and hearable gestures such as shuffling papers (extract 15) and clearing of the throat (extract 16). Furthermore, the acknowledgements serve to shift the focus away from the ministers’ problematic behaviour. In extract 13, ‘the timescales were always going to be difficult’ (line 19)

shifts the focus away from the consequences of the minister's actions (i.e. the committee not being allowed input) to a potential reason for the problem. This is made persuasive through the extreme case formulation 'were always going to be difficult' (line 19). In extract 14, 'I said repeatedly that I have to work with councils in the delivery of this↓' (line 41) shifts the focus away from the minister and onto the councils by constructing their cooperation as necessary to the delivery of the initiative. In extract 15, 'in terms of the: [...] Business Gateway' (lines 13-14) uses 'in terms of' (line 13) to refer to a broad common theme, thereby shifting the focus from the criticism in relation to the closure of a specific (Business Gateway) office towards a discussion of the Business Gateway in general. In extract 16, 'I hear what you're saying convenor' (lines 20-21) represents an ambiguous statement which can be taken to indicate that the minister neither agrees nor disagrees with the criticism. In extract 17, 'perhaps on reflection it might have been better to wait until [...] after [...] today's meeting' (lines 13-15) uses words and expressions ('perhaps', line 13; 'on reflection', line 13; 'it might have been better', line 14) which through their tentative nature indicate that in light of the criticism, the minister is reconsidering the (dis)advantages of having taken a particular action.

Having acknowledged the challenge, the ministers recharacterise the situation as one in which responsibility for the problem highlighted by the committee members lies elsewhere. In extracts 14 and 16, the ministers accomplish this by directly rejecting blame for the problem. In extract 14, the repeated use of 'obviously' in 'obviously they're the local authorities that [...] administer schools and [...] obviously [...] employ the teachers that we [...] need' (lines 42-44) serves to construct the matter as common sense and therefore not in need of an explanation. Furthermore, 'I said repeatedly' (line 40) establishes making this point as routine and thereby factual. In extract 13, 'it's not me who sets the timescale for the JMC Europe meetings' (lines 24-25) attends to the accusation that it was the minister's actions that were the cause of the problem by directly negating it through 'it's not me' (line 24). In extract 15, 'that's not a pattern that's been happening over the past couple of months' (lines 20-21) attends to the implication of responsibility for the closure of Business Gateway offices by indicating that the pattern had not originated recently. This implies that the pattern had manifested itself before the minister's appointment

to his post and is therefore not his responsibility. Furthermore, in extracts 13 to 16, the ministers attribute blame somewhere else. In extract 13, the minister uses the account ‘because they have to: go through cabinet [...] and through all the different ministers’ (lines 21-22) to identify the procedures for setting the EU priorities as the cause of the delay. In extract 14, the account ‘because [...] local authorities that [...] administer schools and [...] obviously [...] employ the teachers that we [...] need’ (lines 42-44) attributes responsibility for setting the target to local authorities. In extract 15, the construction ‘one of the patterns of: use of Business Gateway services [...] is that people are more readily using [...] web-based access to services’ (lines 15-18) identifies people’s decreasing use of Business Gateway offices as the reason for the closures. The minister substantiates this construction through the upshot ‘so [...] arrangements in terms of delineation of the offices [...] is a product of that change’ (lines 27-29). The minister’s repeated use of the word ‘pattern’ (lines 15 and 29) constructs his account as supported by statistical evidence, therefore not as a subjective statement aimed at protecting himself. In extract 16, ‘the actual text of the letters [...] have been issued by the local authorities to parents’ (lines 22-23) attributes responsibility for the text of the letters to local authorities, a suggestion strengthened by the use of ‘actual’ (line 22).

Having attributed responsibility elsewhere for the actions being criticised by the committee members, the ministers in extracts 13, 16, and 17, also minimise the negative consequences of these actions. In extract 13, ‘[committee member’s questions] could be considered [...] for [...] further discussion prior to the JMCE’ (lines 32-33) detracts from the criticism that as a result of the minister’s actions, the committee will not be able to provide input by indicating that this might still be possible. In extract 16, the if-then formulation ‘if they’ve used presumptuous language [...] in those letters then I would apologise for that’ (lines 24-25) suggests apology as a form of compensation while using the conditional ‘I would apologise’ (line 25) to indicate that no apology may be necessary. In extract 17, ‘the only people that will have [...] egg on their face are likely to be [...] us in government’ (lines 17-19) minimises the negative consequences of withdrawing the pilot by indirectly suggesting that the committee will not be affected.

In this section I have examined instances in which the committee members formulate challenges by constructing ministers' actions as problematic, making negative assessments in relation to these actions, and indicating that these have led to negative consequences. The ministers respond to these challenges by attending to their blaming aspect. In particular, the ministers attribute responsibility for the negative consequences of their actions elsewhere, and in some cases minimise the impact of these consequences. Nevertheless, the ministers acknowledge the negative consequences of the chosen course of action, thereby making their responses less interactionally problematic. Dealing with challenges in this way therefore allows ministers to distance themselves from issues of culpability. At the same time, ministers smooth over the awkward aspects of defending themselves through acknowledging the negative consequences of the actions attributed to them.

## **5.4 Summary and discussion**

In this chapter, I have examined the interaction between committee members and ministers in relation to challenges. In particular, I examined interactions in relation to challenges using ministers' previous statements, challenges using the grammatical features of questions to elicit agreement, and challenges that emphasised the negative consequences of the ministers' actions. In the first two sections, I showed that the committee members accomplished the challenges in ways that made them appear indirect or softened, while at the same time making it interactionally problematic for the ministers to counter the challenges. In the third section, I examined instances in which the committee members pose challenges by constructing ministers' behaviour as problematic. The ministers attend to these characteristics of the committee members' utterances by undermining the challenges in ways that did not appear interactionally problematic. The ministers accomplished this in various ways, largely depending on the ways in which the challenges had been formulated: proposing alternative states of affairs to the ones being put forward by the committee members; softening disagreements with accounts and other features; avoiding disagreements altogether; acknowledging problems while attributing blame elsewhere; and minimising the negative consequences of particular actions.

The analysis revealed a number of similarities with CA work conducted in other institutional settings. Similarly to the study by Atkinson and Drew (1979) examining the interaction between witnesses and the Counsel in judicial settings, the ministers attempted to counter the presupposition that they should and could have taken an alternative course of action. A further similarity was the extreme care taken by both committee members and ministers to soften the negative aspect of utterances. However, unlike in Atkinson and Drew's study, committee members formulated the challenges within a single turn, rather than over several turns. This could be due to the fact that unlike broadcast news interviews or courts of law, in the present context ministers and committee members are in many ways colleagues, as I discussed in the introduction to this chapter. This more egalitarian relationship between committee members and ministers means that questions can be fully elaborated by committee members, thereby eliminating the need for several turns. A second reason could be that in Atkinson and Drew's study, those called before the Counsel were there to account for acts of possible negligence, whereas ministers are not necessarily called before committees to be confronted with issues of blame.

The above findings are the first to document the extreme care taken by committee members and ministers in softening challenges and disagreements. This analysis stands in stark contrast to the political science literature, which emphasises the adversarial nature of interactions within parliamentary settings and the availability of mechanisms for holding ministers to account (e.g. parliamentary committees) without investigating the way in which these mechanisms are used in practice. The analysis therefore has theoretical and methodological implications for political science research. The first implication is that the defensiveness documented by scholars within political science in relation to ministers' responses may not necessarily motivated by party politics as scholars have assumed (e.g. Flinders, 2001), but rather by features of the interaction itself. Indeed, defensive reactions by ministers to questions may at times be the result of particular question turns rather than *a priori* decisions to sabotage the process. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the extreme care taken by committee members to establish challenges as reasonable and non-adversarial. The analysis also shows the ways in which ministers counter challenges by attending to the specific issues brought up by the committee members

rather than exhibiting defensiveness. This suggests that researchers examining parliamentary settings should not necessarily assume that interactionally problematic interactions are motivated by party politics, but instead focus more closely on the unfolding of the interaction and monitor for the upshots of utterances.

In this chapter, then, I began to empirically address the adversarial nature of interactions between ministers and committee members documented in the existing literature by pursuing the second research question for this study: How are challenges formulated by committee members and responded to by ministers? In this chapter, I pursued this research question by examining a range of ways in which challenges are put forward and responded to. In the next chapter I will continue to pursue this research question by focusing on a particular type of challenge, namely the way in which lack of action is made accountable by committee members and legitimated by ministers. In examining the issue of accountability for taking action, I will also begin to address the third research question of the study: What are the limitations of parliamentary committee questions as a mechanism for ministerial accountability?



## Chapter 6. Accounting for inaction

In the previous chapter I examined different ways in which committee members posed challenges to the ministers, and the ways in which ministers attempted to undermine them. This provided an initial insight into the second research question this study is pursuing: How are challenges formulated by committee members and responded to by ministers? In this chapter, I will continue to pursue this research question by examining one type of challenges that is particularly important for accountability, namely challenges that are related to ministers' inaction. In doing so, I will also begin to address the third research question of the study: What are the limitations of parliamentary committee questions as a mechanism for ministerial accountability?

The practices through which ministers are held accountable for taking action and the ways in which they legitimate inaction are important, because it is through practices such as these that democratic processes can take shape. However, as discussed in the literature review (see chapter 2), work on ministerial accountability has so far focused exclusively on the structural aspects of interactions between ministers and parliamentary committee members, to the detriment of work examining their practical aspects.

Experimental work within social psychology has shown that there are generally shared assumptions for what counts as a good account. Based on findings by Weiner *et al.* (1987), accounts are more likely to be effective when the cause of the event can be attributed to 'external' (rather than internal), 'uncontrollable' (rather than controllable), or 'unstable' (rather than stable) conditions. Gonzales *et al.* (1992) also found that accounts are more likely to be accepted when the event was accidental, and least likely when intentional. Based on statistical analysis, it appears that this knowledge about what constitutes an effective account is part of our common-sense knowledge, and can be drawn on as a resource when constructing accounts.

Work in other areas also emphasised the effectiveness of accounts focusing on external factors. For example, a study by Taylor (1972) on accounts for sexual

offences found that accounts according to which the sexual offender had no control over their behaviour and thus could not choose to act differently were judged by magistrates to be more acceptable than those in which the offender did appear to have had control. McHugh (1975) also suggests that counter-normative behaviour is a negotiable judgement which depends on the absence of 'conditions of failure', i.e. situations which justify the occurrence of certain counter-normative behaviours.

A number of CA studies have examined strategies for legitimating inaction, both in mundane as well as in institutional settings. In mundane settings, work by Drew (1984) on invitation sequences shows that instead of saying they did not do or are not going to do something, speakers in mundane interactions assert their inability to take action (e.g. following up on a phone call; going to a party) through detailing particular activities or circumstances. In doing so, speakers do not explicitly state the implications of these activities or circumstances. Therefore, although non-action can be inferred from their responses, speakers do not state that action will not be taken.

Similar strategies to indicate non-action were found in a CA study by Atkinson and Drew (1979). The study examined interactions between police officers and Counsel, in which the Counsel examined the failure of officers to take particular actions that would have prevented a group of rioters from engaging in violent acts and damaging property. The analysis of these interactions shows that police officers accounted for their lack of action by constructing interactions with rioters as out with their control, and citing other actions that had to be prioritised during those interactions (e.g. self-defence). As such, these accounts provide reasons for not taking action by working up the constraints imposed by external circumstances, and constructing alternative actions as more appropriate. According to Atkinson and Drew (1979), the police officers' accounts serve to exculpate them for not taking action by deflecting attention away from matters where blame could be allocated.

Based on the above considerations, the analysis presented in this chapter focuses on the way in which ministers legitimate inaction in response to being held accountable for taking action. The aim of this chapter therefore is to examine the ways in which accounts for inaction are used in practice, by focusing on interactions between committee members and ministers in relation to the minister's accountability for taking action.

## Analytic procedure

The analysis was based on a collection of extracts in which committee members made ministers accountable for taking action and ministers accounted for their decision not to do so. In examining these extracts, I was struck by the ways in which the committee members set up their utterances relating to taking action so as to make it difficult for the ministers to say that action would not be taken. I also noted the ways in which ministers countered the expectation of action implicit in committee members' utterances by emphasising the consistency in their motivation to take action while downplaying their accountability to do so. I therefore organised the analysis around these themes, placing particular focus on the ways in which accountability for taking action is negotiated in the interactions between committee members and ministers.

### 6.1. Emphasising continued commitment to taking action

I will start with an examination of instances in which the committee members call into question the minister's commitment to particular issues. Consider the following extracts:

#### Extract 1

This extract relates to the SNP party's manifesto pledge to lift the threshold of entitlement (based on parents' earnings) for free school meals allocated to school pupils.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 01:11:42-01:12:18

PM is Pauline McNeill (Labour MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. PM: Are you committed (.) to lifting. the thresh<sup>↑</sup>old.
2. for example u:m for all families on uh working tax credit
3. >which will mean< ninety-seven thousand (.)
4. children from each uh sch- uh who are at school<sup>↓</sup> (.)
5. are you committed to doing that and when

6. FH: Well↓ our manifesto made it quite clear
7. that we wanted to en- increase the threshold of entitlement to
8. to those that uh uh families in receipt of free school meals
9. >we're quite explicit about it, it's a position we've held
10. for a lo↑ng time, the issue is when we do it<,
11. .hh I've indicated to you that uh the scale of the spend
12. is something that we'll have to consider
13. as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review↓

## Extract 2

This question relates to the up-front fees paid by non-Scottish domiciled students from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland studying in Scotland, and to the fact that Scottish students only have to pay back their tuition fees (initially paid for by the Scottish Government) after graduating and earning an income. In an earlier exchange (shown in section 6.2 as extract 5), JP had asked the minister how she intends to take action on abolishing the upfront tuition fees paid by non-Scottish domiciled UK students, and had reminded the minister of the strong opposition her party had expressed in relation to these fees before being elected into government. The minister had replied that the fees had been introduced by the previous (Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition) Government and that it was wrong of them to have introduced the fees.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 02:16:08-02:16:26

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. JP: Is it still wrong?=  
 2. FH: =We:ll (.) .hh >yes< I do↑ think it's still wrong  
 3. uh wh:- when we- when we change that,  
 4. when we right that, well .hh quite clearly uh uh with the-  
 5. the powers of independence the- an independent uh SNP Government  
 6. quite clearly we will treat English students, .hh Welsh students,  
 7. Northern Ireland students, .hh exactly the same  
 8. as any other students from France and Ge↑rmany.

### Extract 3

This exchange was recorded soon after extract 2 above and also focuses on the tuition fees paid by non-Scottish domiciled UK students.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 02:18:39-02:19:01

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. JP: Right↓ (.) so when you (.) said that they were discriminatory,
2. uh anti-English, (.) that (.) you're the only party
3. making a stand on this, that you'll scrap them
4. when you'll get to power, this would- what you meant to say
5. actually was, well, they'll be put in a queue↓
6. FH: (0.2) Well h(hhh)u we did say that we would want to get rid of them,
7. I've said that we would want to get rid of them,
8. all I'm saying is it's a priority when we want to have the spe↑nd.

In each of the three extracts, the committee members call into question the minister's commitment to particular action statements. In extract 1, PM asks the minister 'are you committed [...] to lifting. the thresh↑old [for free school meals]' (line 1) after the minister had indicated in an earlier exchange (shown in extract 4) that this constitutes a manifesto commitment. In extract 2, the use 'still' (line 1) following the minister's statement that the previous government should not have introduced particular tuition fees indirectly raises the possibility that having been elected to government, the minister no longer wishes to take action against the fees. In extract 3, JP establishes a contrast between a report of the minister's pre-election statement of action 'you [...] said [...] you'll scrap them [the tuition fees] when you'll get to power' (lines 1-4) with a construction of the minister's post-election position as 'they'll be put in a queue↓' (line 5). This serves to characterise the situation as one in which the minister has placed the fees in a list of unresolved issues instead of taking action.

The implication in each of the three extracts, then, is that despite her previous statements and her party having been elected to government (therefore having the ability to take action), the minister is no longer committed to taking action on particular issues. There are two features I would like to point out in relation to the way in which the minister attends to the committee members' turns. Firstly, the

minister constructs her current position as consistent with her previous statements. The minister accomplishes this by emphasising her continued commitment to taking action on the issues raised. In extract 1, the minister describes the intention to increase the threshold of entitlement to free school meals as ‘a position we’ve held for a lo↑ng time’ (lines 9-10), thereby indicating that she is committed to this position. The minister also describes the manifesto pledge to take action on this issue as ‘quite clear’ (line 6) and ‘quite explicit’ (line 9). The emphasis on the clarity and explicitness of the pledge serves to construct the commitment to action as unambiguous. In extract 2, the minister constructs her current views on the tuition fees as consistent with her previous statements. The minister accomplishes this through providing an affirmative answer to JP’s question, and through the use of ‘still’ (line 2) in ‘>yes≤ I do↑ think it’s still wrong’ (line 2). In extract 3, the minister indicates continued commitment by repeating the formulation to ‘get rid of them [the increased fees]’ (line 7) while changing the tense from the past tense ‘we did say’ (line 6) to the past perfect ‘I’ve said’ (line 7) to imply holding the same position over time.

A second feature is that the minister constructs the timing for taking action as dependent on overcoming particular obstacles. The minister accomplishes this by identifying potential barriers to action. In extract 1, the minister identifies ‘the scale of the spend’ (line 11) as a potential obstacle to taking action. In extract 2, the minister states that ‘an independent [...] SNP government’ (line 5) will treat all non-Scottish UK students the same as those from other EU countries. This suggests that Scotland’s current devolved (rather than independent) status represents an obstacle to taking action. Furthermore, in each of the three extracts the minister refers to taking action at a later date: ‘the issue is when we do it’ (extract 1, line 10); ‘when we change that, when we right that’ (extract 2, lines 3-4); the reduction in fees will be a priority ‘when we want to have the spe↑nd’ (extract 3, line 8). Through identifying obstacles and referring to taking action at a later date, the minister implies that the question is not one of *whether* action will be taken, but rather of *when* the obstacles will be overcome and it will be possible to take action. This serves to suggest that action will be taken at some point in the future, once obstacles have been removed.

The minister's responses, then, attend to and inoculate assumptions, in part built into the committee members' questions, that she is no longer motivated to taking action on particular pre-election statements. As I have shown, the minister accomplishes this by constructing her current commitments as consistent with her pre-election statements. The minister therefore downplays the lack of action by emphasising her continued commitment to resolving the issues. In addition, the minister makes the inference available that action will be taken at a later date, once particular barriers to action have been overcome. Doing so allows the minister to further emphasise her commitment to taking action without having to specify when action will be taken.

## 6.2 Downplaying accountability for taking action

In the previous section, I examined instances in which the minister's responses emphasised continued commitment to taking action on particular issues. In this section, I will examine instances in which the ministers downplay their accountability for taking action. Consider the following extracts:

### Extract 4

This extract was recorded shortly before extract 1 (see section 6.1) and also relates to the SNP's manifesto commitment to lift the threshold of entitlement for free school meals. The term 'Comprehensive Spending Review' relates to a review of the financial resources available to the Scottish Government for implementing their manifesto and other initiatives.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 01:10:08-01:10:46

PM is Pauline McNeill (Labour MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. PM: Can I just ask you um on your commitment
2. to free school meals I mean I ha(hhh)ve asked you this before
3. so you won't be surprised .hh I know that you've said that
4. you'll l- look at the comprehensive spending review
5. to determine whether you will lift the thre<sup>↑</sup>shold
6. .hh u::m for uh all children .h uh so that more children
7. can re- re- receive free school meals immediately
8. .h is (.) is that something that you do intend to do (.)
9. [or not<sup>↓</sup>]

10. FH: [ .hhhhh] if you look at our manifesto, part of
11. our provisions was to improve the entitlement to free school meals↓
12. .hh um it was something that I tried to pursue u:m as part of the
13. emergency free school meals bill in two thousand and three
14. .hh to enable uh an extension of benefit entitlement (.)
15. unfortunately that was voted against by the last government.

### Extract 5

The first part of this extract was previously presented in chapter 4 as extract 4. This extract was recorded before extracts 2 and 3 (see section 6.1) and also relates to the tuition fees paid for by non-Scottish domiciled UK students.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 02:15:02-02:16:07

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. JP: >I think< you're on the. record for saying
2. that the application of the- uh fees for English students
3. is anti-English uh (.) and I think >y'know< in the past
4. you've said that .hh English students would be treated the same
5. as students from any other country including Scots uhm for-
6. under an SNP (.) Government and uh we are the only party
7. that has made a stan<sup>↑</sup>ce on this
8. .hh >just wondering< what your intentions are
9. to change the approach for the .hh (.) application of (.) fees
10. to English-domiciled students.
11. FH: .hh well I think it was very regrettable that u:hm:
12. the last government introduced variable top-up fees
13. .hh for students from England, Wales, and Northern Ireland,
14. and they had a- a fee hike .hh and effectively
15. brought in an additional fee cost .hh to: u:h >English stu<sup>↑</sup>dents<
16. so your quotes >you know< that I made were absolutely right
17. >that I thought that was wrong at the time, and that's why
18. we voted against it↓< .hh interestingly it's- the SNP were
19. the only party to stand up for English stu<sup>↑</sup>dents .hh
20. when it came round to the- uh the voting in Parliament I think
21. .hh uh just about a year ago.



## Extract 6

This extract was recorded shortly after extracts 2, 3, and 5, and relates to the increase in fees for non-Scottish domiciled medical students.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 02:20:09-02:21:17

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. JP: There's another choice uh Convenor
2. >I was just wondering< uh (.) the very clear stance
3. that you took on the medical fees
4. that will be coming in to uh uh effect (.) with the increase
5. in the medical fees I think you uh voted against (.) u:m=
6. FH: =Yep=
7. JP: =them and were very clear in opposition=
8. FH: =Mhm=
9. JP: =uhm is this an area where (.) you've decided
10. not to ch- to change as well?
11. FH: .hh Well↓ the: huh the increase in fees uh >the medical fees<
12. were actually the same as the oth- the other fees
13. that were introduced↓ >it was just< the medical fees
14. were .hh uh when there was across the board increase
15. in uh uh variable top-up fees for English students
16. .hh by the last government, they decided
17. to put up the fees for medical students even further↓
18. .hh the reason they wanted to do so
19. was to- to try and deter English medical students
20. from taking up places in Scottish universities
21. .hh which I think is quite b:latantly .hh discriminatory↓,
22. I also think it was a- a daft policy
23. because it didn't actually achieve what it was meant to achieve
24. .hh and in fact uh I think the number of the- the- the-
25. the reduction in the number of medical students coming
26. would have fitted in a bus, I think one university Principal called it.
27. BMA didn't think it was a good idea, University Scotland
28. didn't think it was a good idea, .hh we didn't think it was a good idea↓
29. we voted against it, thought it was the wrong thing.

## Extract 7

The first part of this extract was previously presented in chapter 4 as extract 2. All new teachers in Scotland are required to fulfil a period of probation (generally lasting one year) before being awarded full registration as a teacher. Under the Labour Government, there had been a shortage of available probationary posts, a situation that the new SNP Government is attempting to address. This question follows the minister's announcement of 300 new posts for probationary teachers.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 01:26:43-01:28:25

KM is Ken Mackintosh (Labour MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. KM: >Can I just< ask about uh probationary (.) teachers↓
2. >can I just< ask uh clearly (.) given the anxiety that exists u:m
3. the announcement of >three hundred new posts
4. is very welcome< indeed (.) u:h >can I just< ask u:m
5. how (.) your figure (.) >of three hundred< was reached,
6. what the calculation is↓ (.) um coz clearly (.)
7. u::h the worry is that that may not be enough.
8. FH: (0.2) chhhh Well↓ one of the- one of the things
9. that we inherited when we came into government
10. was a situation where .hh there weren't as many vacancies
11. for post-probationers .hh um as might have >been anticipated<
12. .hh u:m the concerns I think was raised in the debate recently
13. by Hugh Henry that he f- felt that certain councils
14. .hh in order to meet their targets of >fifty-three< thousand
15. hadn't put non-frontline classroom teachers
16. and counted them as teachers to meet the numbers
17. and didn't release extra places to do that↓
18. now that was Hugh Henry's position
19. he might be .hh in a better position to know that
20. having been the Minister in charge at the time. (.)
21. .hhhh um now our understanding is that u:h
22. I asked my officials to try and find out from local authorities
23. what the shape of (.) the pr- >you know<
24. the size of the v- vacancies situation was (.)
25. .hhh we understand that there- um there are roughly
26. about two thousand four hundred posts available? (.)
27. um at this point in time, .hh we've added
28. another three hundred to that↑, (.) um a::nd we think
29. that if there's- uh there's uh:: about three thousand
30. three hundred new teachers coming in↓
31. =now that obviously leaves a gap (.) of about seven hundred, (.)
32. .hh but if you notice the vacancy (.) .h figures that came out
33. for February um this past year that w- >we al-< we always
34. have to make sure that there are enough teachers in the system (.)
35. .hh that during the course of the year for movements in and out with-

36. that they can be covered↓ (.) .hh so↓ vacancy level  
 37. of about seven hundred is standard (.) .hhh um (.) in order that↓  
 38. that meets the- the- the: requirements of the vacancies

### Extract 8

The first part of this extract was presented in section 6.1 as extract 3, and focuses on the tuition fees for non-Scottish domiciled UK students studying in Scotland.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 02:18:39-02:19:40/6

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. JP: Right↓ (.) so when you (.) said that they were discriminatory,  
 2. uh anti-English, (.) that (.) you're the only party  
 3. making a stand on this, that you'll scrap them  
 4. when you'll get to power, this would- what you meant to say  
 5. actually was, well, they'll be put in a queue↓  
 6. FH: (0.2) Well h(hhh)u we did say that we would want to get rid of them,  
 7. I've said that we would want to get rid of them,  
 8. all I'm saying is it's a priority when we want to have the spe↑nd.  
 9. we can't undo all the things- .hh spend all our time undoing  
 10. .h and unpicking everything that the last (.) government did (.)  
 11. .hh and quite frankly we are making significant prog- progress .h o:n  
 12. uh introducing the- the abolition of the Graduate Endowment Fee, (.)  
 13. .hh which I think the member supports, we might want to say  
 14. okay, uh I might want to say well in that case (.)  
 15. .hh >you know< given a choice between  
 16. abolishing the Graduate Endowment Fee for Scots uh students↑,  
 17. remember English Wales and Northern Ireland don't pay  
 18. the Graduate Endowment Fee↓, .hh is that a bigger priority tha:n u:h  
 19. changing and reducing the fees levels for English .hh students  
 20. that were introduced by the last government, probably not↓ (.)  
 21. .hh politics↑ is about priorities↓  
 22. and we set our stall out, we voted against it, we didn't think  
 23. it shoulda happened, .hh at the end of the day,  
 24. .hh u:h what we need to do is drive our agenda forward↓  
 25. and our agenda >quite clearly< is making significant .hh impact  
 26. on relieving Scottish students of debt

## Extract 9

The first part of this extract was previously presented in chapter 4 as extract 3. This extract relates to the SNP's manifesto pledge to ask the UK Government for the creation of a Scottish News Service.

ELLCC 27/06/07:2; 00:29:06-00:29:34

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JP: You said 'as a very minimum (.)
2. .h we will demand the creaton- creation
3. of a Scottish News Service' (.) uh unquote
4. what- what are your plans to: deliver that
5. LF: (0.2) .hh Well again that's something that-
6. that will be open for discussion↓ (.)
7. you know, we put out our manifesto,
8. it's what we see as best for Scotland (.)
9. of course it is, any political party who does that
10. puts what they believe would be best (.)
11. .h we will try and action these things
12. by discussing (.) .hh uh with the appropriate people
13. how we would see it move forward.

In each of the extracts above, the committee members construct not taking action as accountable. The committee members achieve this by reporting particular action-related statements made by the ministers before asking a question about taking action. In extract 4, PM reminds the minister about a particular commitment (to lift the threshold for free school meals) before asking whether action will follow: 'is that [lifting the threshold for free school meals] something that you do intend to do [...] or not↓' (lines 8-9). In extract 5, JP indicates that the minister is 'on the. record' (line 1) for taking a stand against a particular issue (tuition fees for non-Scottish domiciled students) before asking about intentions 'to change the approach' (line 9), thereby basing the question on the premise that action will be taken. In extract 6, JP reminds the minister of 'the very clear stance' (line 2) and being 'very clear in opposition' (line 7) of a particular issue (medical tuition fees), and subsequently asks the minister if this is 'an area [...] you've decided not to [...] change as well?' (lines 9-10). In extract 7, KM acknowledges that some action had been taken ('the announcement of >three hundred new posts is very welcome< indeed', lines 3-4), but indicates that

further action is required: ‘the worry is [...] that may not be enough’ (line 7). In extract 8, as indicated in the analysis for extract 3 (section 6.1), JP sets up a contrast between the pre-election commitment to ‘scrap them [the tuition fees] when coming to power’ (lines 3-4) and ‘what you meant to say actually was [...] they’ll be put in a queue↓’ (lines 4-5) indicating lack of action on this issue after being elected to government. In extract 9, JP reminds the minister of a manifesto commitment through ‘you said [...] unquote’ (lines 1-3) before basing the question ‘what are your plans to: deliver that’ (line 4) on the premise that action consistent with the manifesto commitment will be taken.

The committee members’ utterances, then, construct lack of action on previous commitments as accountable. In their answers, the ministers attend to this construction by downplaying their accountability for taking action. The ministers accomplish this in three ways. The first way is by highlighting the role of others (i.e. the previous government) in generating or perpetuating the problem. To do so, the ministers make the inference available that the problem that their actions are meant to solve was caused or perpetuated by others: ‘[the minister’s previous attempt to take action] was voted against by the last government’ (extract 4, line 15); ‘the last government introduced variable top-up fees’ (extract 5, line 12); ‘they [the previous government] decided to put up the fees for medical students even further↓’ (extract 6, lines 16-17); ‘one of the things that we inherited when we came into government was a situation where [...] there weren’t as many vacancies for post-probationers [...] as might have >been anticipated<’ (extract 7, lines 8-11); ‘the fee levels for English [...] students [...] were introduced by the last government’ (extract 9, lines 19-20). Moreover, the ministers highlight others’ role through using negative assessments in relation to others’ actions, such as ‘unfortunately’ (extract 4, line 15); ‘regrettable’ (extract 5, line 11); ‘quite blatantly [...] discriminatory↓’ (extract 6, line 21); ‘a daft policy’ (extract 6, line 22). The ministers also work up consensus over the poor quality of others’ policies. In extract 6, the minister accomplishes this through the use of a three-part list in lines 27-28: (i) ‘BMA didn’t think it was a good idea; (ii) University Scotland didn’t think it was a good idea; (iii) we didn’t think it was a good idea’. Through repeating the description ‘not a good idea’, the use of the three-part list in this extract makes the negative assessment of the previous government’s

actions persuasive, while also implying that there is consensus over this negative assessment. In extract 7, the same function is served by the use of footing in conjunction with an account of the problem: ‘Hugh Henry [...] felt that certain councils [...] counted [non-frontline classroom teachers] as teachers’ (lines 13-16). The minister makes the account persuasive by describing Hugh Henry as ‘the minister in cha:rge at the time’ (line 20), thereby conferring credibility to his statement.

The second way in which the ministers downplay their accountability for taking action is by indicating that they have already taken action consistent with their action-related statements. In extract 4, the minister indicates that she had tried to take action on the issue (increasing the threshold for free school meals) and establishes this claim as factual by suggesting that this attempt was made ‘as part of the emergency free school meals bill in two thousand and three’ (lines 12-13). In extract 5, the minister refers to her party having ‘voted against [the fees]’ (line 18) and therefore having already taken action. Furthermore, the minister describes her party as ‘the only party to stand up for English stu↑dents’ (line 19) and substantiates her claims through an upshot referring to JP’s quotes ‘so your quotes [...] were absolutely right’ (line 16). In extract 7, the minister indicates that ‘we’ve added another three hundred [posts]’ (lines 27-28) to indicate that action has already been taken. In extract 8, the minister refers to two actions taken in the past: ‘we set our stall out’ (line 22) and ‘we voted against it’ (line 23), thereby suggesting that actions consistent with the previous statement have been taken.

The third way in which the ministers downplay their accountability for taking action is by using a range of features designed to normalise not taking action. In extract 7, the minister indicates that ‘vacancy level of about seven hundred is standard’ (lines 36-37), thereby constructing not taking action as consistent with the norm. In extracts 8 and 9, the minister uses script formulations, i.e. descriptions that establish events or actions as routine, recurrent and predictable (Edwards, 1994; 1995): ‘politics↑ is about priorities↓’ (extract 8, line 21); ‘any political party who does that [makes a manifesto] puts what they believe would be best’ (extract 9, lines 9-10). These script formulations serve to normalise not taking action and to construct lack of action as not requiring any special account. In extract 9, ‘what we see as best

for Scotland’ (line 8) also reformulates the content of the manifesto (referred to by JP in substantiating the action-related statement) as what the party would ideally like to achieve rather than a firm commitment, while ‘of course it is’ (line 9) constructs this reformulation as commonsense.

The ministers’ answers, then, attend to inaction being constructed as accountable by downplaying their accountability for taking action. The ministers accomplish this in three ways: by highlighting the negative role of others in relation to the problem that action is meant to solve; by indicating that they have already taken action in relation to the issues raised; and by normalising not taking action.

### 6.3 Constructing taking action as inappropriate

In the previous section I examined instances in which ministers downplay their accountability for taking action in response to inaction being constructed as accountable by the committee members. In this section, I will examine instances in which the ministers legitimate not taking action in response to specific suggestions for action. Consider the following extracts:

#### Extract 10

The term ‘JMC’ relates to Joint Ministerial Committee, an over-arching body set up by the UK Government to provide a forum where ministers from the UK Government and the devolved administrations can discuss issues that concern all four UK territories. At the ‘JMC’ on the European Union (to which this extract relates), the issues under discussion are in connection to matters concerning the European Union. The term ‘common fisheries’ relates to the European Union’s Common Fisheries Policy, which sets quotas for which member states are allowed to catch what amounts of each type of fish. The policy has been criticised by fishermen for threatening their livelihoods. As most of the UK fisheries are located in Scotland, the SNP Government is committed to the withdrawal of the UK from adhering to this policy.

EERC 26/06/07:2; 00:13:29-00:15:01

IO is Irene Oldfather (Labour MSP); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. IO: One point that Minister did raise in that
2. was that she had attended (.) u:m (.) the JMC (.)

3. u:h committee on >European Union< on 5th June (.)  
4. .hh and of course that would have been in advance  
5. of the Council meeting on the 21st and 22nd of June.  
6. and she will recall from the committee's earlier work  
7. how interested we are in JMCs (.)  
8. .hhh given that this was such an important (.) uh  
9. point for her and- and her government (.)  
10. .hh can I ask did she in fact raise↑ it, (.)  
11. was there discussion at the JMC on Europe,  
12. in relation (.) .hh to this u::m (.) and given that  
13. she has said today (.) .hh that withdrawal from the Common Fisheries  
14. is actually a matter for the UK Government, (.) clearly, (.)  
15. .hh I would have thought that would have been  
16. the forum to actually initiate and start discussions  
17. so (.) .hh um can she tell us did she raise that at the JMC on Europe.=  
18. LF: =Right↓ (.) I've got two point to answer to this. (.)  
19. .hh uh first of all (.) u::m:: (.) I went along to the JMC in Europe. (.)  
20. u::m it was quite↑ an experience↑, we want to work constructively (.)  
21. .hh with Westminster. (.) .hh I wasn't↑ particularly happy  
22. about the formats of the meetings. (.) in being told  
23. that I would have a spea↑king slot (.)  
24. .hhh u::h but in actual fact I feel that if it is a joint  
25. ministerial committee (.) .hh u:h it should be (.) .hh equal weight  
26. given to: (.) discussion (.) fro:m the devolved administrations  
27. and- and Westminster >when they turn up< (.)  
28. I presume that will change (.) .hh in future  
29. because what I did say was very well received. (.)  
30. .hh I didn't parti↑cularly raise fishing, (.) becau::se (.)  
31. my (.) u:h cabinet secretary colleague Richard Lochhead, (.)  
32. .hh was having bilateral discussions↑ I thi↑nk the very next day (.)  
33. .hhhh uh with the appropriate minister (.) uh for fisheries. (.)  
34. and we felt this was the most constructive way forward.

## Extract 11

This extract was recorded shortly after extract 10 and relates to the proposed reduction in the number of Scottish Members of the European Parliament (henceforth MEPs).

EERC 26/06/07:2; 00:45:24-00:46:25

IO is Irene Oldfather (Labour MSP); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. IO: In terms of the reduction in the number of MEPs=
2. LF: =Ye::s.=
3. IO: =I actually- I do have a copy of the letter,



4. it's dated the fourth of June,  
5. LF: [mhm]  
6. IO: [.hhh] uhm and I just wondered if maybe that had been  
7. something you would have had an opportunity to raise  
8. at the JMC in Europe, because obviously that  
9. would have been quite (.) important.  
10. LF: Mhm. (.) I did↑ consider raising it, [Irene],  
11. IO: [a h a]  
12. LF: but- but as I- as I said to you earlier (.) e(hhhhhh) (.)  
13. it was a very strange [meeting]  
14. IO: [r i g h t.]  
15. LF: which I hope↑ will be very differently  
16. handled in the future (.) .hh u::m (.)  
17. ((coughs in background))  
18. uh (0.2) I didn't feel it was a joint meeting. (.)  
19. and an opportunity given for a real joint discussion. (.)  
20. u:h amongst:t (.) uh Westminster, (.) u::h Scotland (.)  
21. a:nd the- (.) the North of Ireland was there as well (.)  
22. .hh u:m it was a- a (.) fairly short meeting,  
23. it seems to be the format that has been taken, (.)  
24. .hh over recent years, and I hope that will very much change. (.)  
25. .hh uh so:: (.) I thought of raising that, but u:h  
26. I didn't↑, (.) raise that particular issue  
27. because I knew that the MEPs themselves (.) were raising it. (.)  
28. .hh u:h directly with Westminster too. (.)  
29. .hh and through their own parliamentary groups etcetera.

## Extract 12

This extract relates to the previous (Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition) Scottish Government's financial commitment to Malawi. The extract follows the minister's earlier answer that she intends to visit Malawi during the October parliamentary recess in order to reassure the Malawi authorities that despite the change in administration, Scotland is still committed to helping Malawi.

EERC 26/06/07:2; 01:04:21-01:05:23

JB is Jackie Baillie (Labour MSP and Convenor of EERC); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JB: Okay so. (.) you're not gonna (.) take the opportunity  
2. of perhaps visiting during the summer recess↓ where- (.)  
3. .hh >you know< I think an early visit would do exactly  
4. what you're describing (.) send out (.) the right  
5. message of reassurance to- (.) to people in Malawi.  
6. LF: No I'm not- I'm not going to do that and- and-  
7. and there's issues round that (.)  
8. u::h I di↑d consider it. (.) of course I did.

9. but there's some big issues in Malawi just now. (.)
10. .hh you'll know that the President's wife died
11. and the period of mourning's coming to an end next week.
12. so there's- (.) there's a level (.) uh of- (.)
13. of working that hasn't been done. (.) .hh there also is a bit of a- (.)
14. a constitutional wrangle↑ going on in Malawi just now↑, (.)
15. at parliamentary↑ and government level↑, (.)
16. .hh uh it's going through the courts, uh (.) there may end up
17. being an election in Malawi later on this year, (.) .hh out of (.) time (.)
18. u:h I hope it doesn't happen because I th- I think it may be unsettling (.)
19. .hh so:: (.) I feel u::m (.) I would rather things were politically settled (.)
20. which I- (.) fingers crossed they will be (.)
21. by the time I go out in October. (.)
22. .hh uh and- and they have got over this- (.) this blip. (.)
23. u:h rather than my going out while things are a bit in turmoil
24. and there's so many other things in people's minds.

### Extract 13

This extract relates to the SNP Government's commitment to reduce the number of pupils in P1 to P3 (primary 1 to 3) classes down to eighteen. In an earlier answer, the minister refused to provide a specific target for this reduction and indicated that she is aiming for year-on-year progress instead of setting targets.

ELLCC 27/06/07:02; 01:43:39-01:44:55

KW is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. KW: I uh absolutely (.) appreciate your-
2. um mh why (.) you would want year on year progress
3. >and I think< .hh um that's- that's (.) to be welcomed (.)
4. .hh however um it could well be (.) that if you don't have
5. an overall (.) target for when you would like
6. the policy to be implemented (.)
7. .hh I'm not saying set a date in stone,
8. I'm saying- but we need some timescale↓ (.)
9. .hh it may well be that this policy couldn't um be implemented
10. .h because um the directors of education and local authorities
11. will .hh use the fact that there's um uh no: date um
12. perhaps not↑ um to implement this policy↓
13. FH: .hhh u:h You could- you could be right↑ (.) uh:,
14. however I've got a bit more confidence in local authorities
15. than perhaps the- the Convenor has↓ and I think that's the issue
16. that the relationship that this government's
17. gonna have with local authorities (.)
18. .hh and part of that is gonna be an outcome agreement↓ (.)

19. it's not necessarily gonna be >sort of<
20. setting individual targets for individual things,
21. I think you- you talked about targets. (.)
22. .hh and that- I think that's the key issue here↓ is that
23. if we provide- and many local authorities are saying to us (.)
24. .hh what we want are outcome agreements. (.) that's what we want↓ (.)
25. we don't want you to be telling us from the centre,
26. .hh do this by this date, by when, and- etcetera↓ (.)
27. we have a big ambitious target (.) .hh absolutely↓ (.) of uh
28. >you know< reducing class sizes down to eighteen,
29. but we cannot do it on our own in central government↓

In each of the four extracts, the committee members suggest that a particular action should be or should have been undertaken. There are two features I would like to point out in relation to the way in which this is accomplished. The first feature is that the committee members show preference for a particular line of action. The committee members accomplish this in part through the design of their utterances. In extracts 10 and 11, preference is shown through making a negative answer implicitly problematic through the grammatical design of the utterances: 'did she in fact raise↑ it' (extract 10, line 10); 'did she raise that' (extract 10, line 17); 'maybe that had been something you would have had an opportunity to raise' (extract 11, lines 6-7). The use of the past tense in extract 10 and the conditional tense in extract 11 contribute to making it difficult for the minister to answer that the issues had not been raised. In extract 12, preference is shown through the use of a negative interrogative, making the negative answer explicitly dispreferred (Heritage and Clayman, 2002): 'so [...] you're not gonna' (line 1). In extract 13, preference is shown through the contrast between 'I'm saying' (line 8) and 'but we need' (line 8), indicating that a particular action represents an objective need rather than a subjective suggestion by the committee member. Preference is also shown through a range of modifying features used in the wording of the questions, which introduce the alternative course of action as a possibility: 'in fact' (extract 10, line 10); 'maybe' (extract 11, line 6); 'perhaps' (extract 12, line 2) all serve to show preference for an affirmative answer. Furthermore, the expressions 'had the opportunity' (extract 11, line 7) and 'take the opportunity' (extract 12, line 1) construct the course of action proposed by the committee members as something to be taken advantage of. These features of the

design do preference by indicating that the action should have been or should be undertaken.

The second feature is that the committee members emphasise the importance of undertaking the particular course of action. In extract 10, ‘this [the issue of Scottish fisheries] was such an important [...] point’ (lines 8-9) uses the modifying feature ‘such an important [...] point’ (lines 8-9) to emphasise the need to raise the issue. Furthermore, the committee member indicates that the JMC meeting ‘would have been the forum to actually initiate and start discussions’ (lines 15-16), where the use of the conditional tense and ‘actually’ (line 16) and the use of the definite article ‘the’ (instead of the indefinite article ‘a’) in ‘the forum’ (line 15) serve to emphasise the importance of raising the issue within that meeting. In extract 11, ‘obviously that [raising the proposed reduction in number of Scottish MEPs] would have been quite [...] important’ (lines 8-9) uses the modifying feature ‘quite [...] important’ (line 9) and ‘obviously’ (line 8) to make the statement persuasive. In extract 12, ‘an early visit would [...] send out [...] the right message of reassurance’ (lines 3-5) uses ‘the right message’ (lines 4-5) to highlight the importance of taking the proposed course of action for sending a positive (as opposed to a negative) message to the people of Malawi. In extract 13, not taking the proposed course of action (i.e. not providing a specific date) is constructed as having the negative consequence of leading the directors of education ‘not↑ [...] to implement this policy↓’ (line 12). This consequence is introduced as a possibility through using ‘perhaps’ (line 12), the conditional tense (‘it could [...] be’, line 4), and the modifying feature ‘well’ (line 4).

In emphasising the importance of undertaking or having undertaken the action, the committee members also indirectly undermine any barriers to doing so. In extract 11, the letter informing the minister of the proposed reduction in the number of Scottish MEPs is ‘dated the fourth of June’ (line 4), which indirectly implies that the minister would have been aware of the proposal before the JMC meeting<sup>9</sup> and thereby able to raise the issue. In extract 12, an early visit to Malawi would ‘do exactly what you’re describing’ (lines 3-4), therefore the action is presented as consistent with the minister’s goals. In extract 13, the committee member attends to

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<sup>9</sup> The JMC had taken place on the 5<sup>th</sup> June, according to the previous extract.

the possibility that her suggestion might be misunderstood as to ‘set a date in stone’ (line 7) by negating this interpretation.

So far, then, I have shown that the committee members use their utterances to indicate to the minister that a particular course of action should have been or should be undertaken. The ministers respond to these suggestions by undermining the appropriateness of the suggested course of action and proposing an alternative solution as more advantageous. I would like to make three observations in relation to the answers provided by the ministers.

The first observation is that in the case of extracts 10 and 11, where the opportunity for undertaking the action has occurred in the past, the minister does not explicitly say that she did not follow the suggested course of action. Instead, the minister provides an ambiguous answer using modifying features: ‘I didn’t parti↑cularly raise fishing↑’ (extract 10, line 30); ‘I didn’t↑ [...] raise that particular issue’ (extract 11, line 26). The use of ‘parti↑cularly’ (extract 10, line 30) and ‘particular’ (extract 11, line 26) serves to infer that the issues may have been raised alongside others, therefore enabling the minister not to provide the dispreferred answer<sup>10</sup> (that the issues had not been raised at all).

A second observation is that the minister undermines the appropriateness of the suggested course of action. This is done by initially indicating that the suggested course of action has some validity: ‘I thought of raising that’ (extract 11, line 25); ‘I di↑d consider it [...] of course I did’ (extract 12, line 8); ‘you could be right↑’ (extract 13, line 13). Subsequently, the ministers highlight problems associated with the suggested course of action. In extracts 10 and 11, the minister describes the JMC meeting as ‘quite↑ an experience↑’ (extract 10, line 20) and ‘a very strange meeting’ (extract 11, line 13), indicating that the particular meeting the minister attended was not representative of JMC meetings. In extract 12, the minister says that ‘there’s issues around that’ (line 7) and ‘there’s some big issues in Malawi just now’ (line 9), thereby suggesting that there are special circumstances to be taken into account. In extract 13, the minister recharacterises the committee member’s suggestion as a lack

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<sup>10</sup> By contrast, in extract 12 the answer starts with a direct ‘No I’m [...] not going to do that’ (line 5) in relation to visiting Malawi during the summer recess rather than October. This is most likely due to the minister already having announced to the committee that she planned visiting Malawi during the October recess.

of trust in local authorities, and indicates that this lack of trust is not shared by the minister: ‘I’ve got a bit more confidence in local authorities than perhaps [...] the convenor has↓’ (extract 13, lines 14-15). In highlighting the problems associated with the suggested course of action, the ministers also identify barriers to action. In extracts 10 and 11, the barriers are in relation to the JMC meeting: ‘I wasn’t↑ particularly happy about the formats of the mee↑tings’ (extract 10, lines 21-22); ‘it was a [...] fairly short meeting↑’ (extract 11, line 22). Furthermore, the minister makes the ‘joint’ (line 24) aspect of the meeting contingent upon there being ‘equal weight given to: [...] discussion [...] from the devolved administrations [...] and Westminster’ (lines 25-27) through using the conditional tense (‘if it is a joint ministerial committee’, lines 24-25). Furthermore, the minister also implies that this ‘joint’ (line 24) aspect of the meeting was disingenuous by indicating that she had been offered ‘a spea↑king slot’ (line 23). This implies that the meeting did not provide the opportunity to undertake the suggested course of action (raising particular issues) due to not providing an egalitarian atmosphere. In extract 12, the barriers are related to recent circumstances in Malawi: ‘the president’s wife died’ (line 10); ‘there is [...] a constitutional wrangle↑ going on in Malawi just now↑’ (lines 13-14); ‘there may end up being an election in Malawi later on this year’ (lines 16-17). The minister indicates that these would coincide with an early visit, which implies that the suggested course of action (an early visit to Malawi) would be negatively affected by these circumstances. In extract 13, the minister identifies the government’s inability to implement the policy without the cooperation of local authorities as a potential barrier: ‘we have a big ambitious target [...] but we cannot do it on our own in central government↓’ (lines 27-29). This makes the inference available that the government needs to cooperate with local authorities, rather than follow the suggested course of action of imposing specific dates by which the policy should be implemented.

The third feature is to construct an alternative course of action as more appropriate. In doing so, the minister deals with issues of accountability. In extract 10, the minister says she did not raise the issue of fisheries because her colleague was having bilateral discussions ‘the very next day [...] with the appropriate minister’ (lines 32-33) and that ‘this was the most constructive way forward’ (line

34). The use of ‘appropriate’ (line 33) in relation to the minister, and the extreme case formulation ‘the most constructive way forward’ (line 34) makes the advantage presented by the an alternative course of action persuasive. In extract 11, the minister says that ‘the MEPs themselves [...] were raising it [the reduction in the number of Scottish MEPs]’ (line 27), the use of ‘themselves’ serving to construct the MEPs as stakeholders. The minister thereby implies that having the issue raised by the stakeholders is more effective than the issue being raised by a minister on their behalf. In extract 12, the minister constructs the alternative course of action as more favourable by setting up a contrast between the political situation she would be likely to find during an early visit when ‘things are a bit in turmoil and there’s so many other things in people’s minds’ (lines 23-24) with her wish to visit Malawi when ‘things were politically settled’ (line 19) and ‘they [the people of Malawi] have got over [...] this blip’ (line 22). Through constructing the current situation as a ‘blip’ (line 22), the minister makes the inference available that the current difficulties are short-lived and therefore likely to be overcome by the time of a later visit. The minister therefore makes the inference available that postponing her visit is the more sensible and culturally sensitive thing to do. In extract 13, the minister works up consensus over the alternative course of action being more appropriate by indicating that this alternative was requested by the stakeholders. She makes her claim persuasive through the use of footing (‘many local authorities are saying to us’, line 23) and active voicing (‘that’s what we want↓’, line 24). The minister thereby makes the inference available that she is acting in accordance with stakeholders’ wishes, while constructing the suggested course of action as inconsistent with these and therefore as less appropriate.

In this section, therefore, I have examined instances in which the ministers undermine a course of action suggested by the committee members. The ministers accomplish this by constructing an alternative course of action as more appropriate, which serves to provide reassurance that (some) action has been or is being taken.

## 6.4 Summary and discussion

In this chapter I have examined different ways in which accountability for taking action is worked out in the interaction between committee members and ministers. In particular, I focused on instances in which committee members made ministers accountable for taking action and ministers accounted for their decision not to take action. The analysis revealed that in accounting for not taking action, ministers emphasised their inability as opposed to their unwillingness to take action. In response to being made accountable for taking action, the ministers attributed their lack of action to external circumstances or to the role of others in generating the problem, while emphasising their continued motivation to take action on the issues themselves.

The findings are consistent with experimental research indicating that those accounts that are seen as most effective are those that refer to external, uncontrollable, and unstable factors (Weiner *et al.*, 1987). The present findings also contribute to this body of work by indicating that which of these factors are used in specific accounts depends on the situational constraints and what can be interactionally negotiated. Furthermore, the analysis presented in this chapter also suggests that the ‘strategic’ character of accounting should not only be seen as the work of the individual (as is often the case in experimental work), but as a co-constructed achievement.

These findings can be interpreted in light of work by McHugh (1975) suggesting that counter-normative behaviour (such as not taking action, in this case) is a negotiable judgement which depends on the absence of ‘conditions of failure’, i.e. situations which justify the occurrence of certain abnormal behaviour. In my study, ministers can be seen to play down their culpability by drawing upon a ‘condition of failure’. By identifying external obstacles and the role of others as reason for their inaction, respondents make clear that an alternative way of acting, that is taking action or pursuing the course of action suggested by committee members, is highly problematic. In doing so ministers deal with issues of blame, that is, they mitigate their culpability for not taking action.

The analysis is also in line with CA studies. In particular, ministers’ emphasis on their inability to take action due to external circumstances resonates with work by



Drew (1984) on speakers' reportings in invitation sequences, where it was shown that instead of saying they did not do or are not going to do something, speakers in mundane interactions assert their inability to do so. Within institutional settings, the findings of this study are consistent with analysis by Atkinson and Drew (1979), which shows that one important function served by accounts for inaction is to deflect attention away from matters where blame could potentially be allocated.

In the present chapter, therefore, I examined the way in which ministers responded to challenges relating to their accountability for taking action. Through adopting this focus, this chapter enabled me to build on the findings of chapter 5 in pursuing the second research question of the study: How are challenges formulated by committee members and responded to by ministers? In pursuing this research question, the analysis revealed different ways in which ministers legitimate not taking action, thereby providing initial insights for the third research question of the study: What are the limitations of parliamentary committee questions as a mechanism for ministerial accountability? In this next chapter, I will pursue this third research question in more depth by examining different ways in which ministers avoid answering questions.

## Chapter 7. Accounting for not answering questions

In the previous chapter, I examined ministers' responses in relation to challenging questions making them accountable for not taking action. The analysis revealed that ministers were able to legitimate not taking action despite being made accountable by committee members, and that they employed several strategies for doing so. These findings therefore provided initial insights in relation to the third research question of this study: What are the limitations of parliamentary committee questions as a mechanism for ministerial accountability? In this chapter, I will address this question in more depth by analysing instances in which ministers avoid answering questions. This helps address the research questions by focusing on the most basic way in which ministerial accountability is accomplished in practice, namely the use of committee members' questions.

Research on interviews suggests that politicians frequently avoid answering questions (Bavelas *et al.*, 1988; Bull, 1994, 1998; Bull and Mayer, 1993; Clayman, 1993; Greatbach, 1986; Harris, 1991). This research provides two important starting points for the present chapter. The first of these relates to the perspective from which it can be decided whether an utterance following a question constitutes 'not answering'. One way of approaching this aspect is to decide what constitutes an 'answer' and a 'non-answer' based on a clear-cut definition set by the analyst. For example, Harris (1991) makes the distinction between 'responses' (any utterance that follows a question) and 'answers'. Furthermore, she classifies responses into direct answers (e.g. 'yes'; 'no'), indirect answers (choosing intermediary between 'yes' and 'no'), and challenges to the question. Another way of deciding what constitutes 'not answering', taken by CA studies (e.g. Clayman and Heritage, 2002), is to identify 'not answering' based on the way in which speakers attend to their own or others' utterances. The analysis presented in this chapter will take this latter approach.

A second important insight provided by the existing literature relates to the different ways in which 'answering' and 'not answering' are accomplished. Clayman and Heritage (2002) investigated how speakers 'accomplish' answering in the

context of broadcast interviews. The study found that some answers take a roundabout trajectory, such as providing a context for the situation and only subsequently addressing the question. However, interviewers monitor and evaluate turns incrementally, treating such answers as attempts to avoid answering. A more frequent type of answer, therefore, establishes the ‘answering’ element early on, and subsequently elaborates the answer. The ‘answering’ element is established through the use of indexical expressions and similarities in phrasing, which serve to link the answer to a preceding question.

Other types of answers exhibit some resistance to the question by altering the terms of the question. One form of resistance has been found by Greatbach (1986), who showed cases in which interviewees request permission to shift the topic of the question. This can also be accomplished by token requests such as ‘can I also say’. In both cases, the interviewees loosen the strictures inherent in answering questions.

CA studies on broadcast interviews have also investigated cases in which interviewees refuse to answer the question. One way is by indicating that the information necessary to answer the question is unavailable, or that the answer cannot be provided under current circumstances. A more direct way is by constructing the question as improper and thereby not worthy of an answer. In both cases, refusing to answer the question is legitimated by deflecting responsibility for the refusal away from the interviewee and focusing it on external circumstances.

Investigating the way in which ministers avoid answering questions is important for improving the process of ministerial accountability, as having insight into how ministers avoid questions can help to make them more accountable. Therefore, the analysis presented in this chapter focuses on how ministers resist answering committee members’ questions.

### **Analytic procedure**

The analysis is based on a collection of extracts in which ministers avoid answering committee members’ questions. In deciding what constitutes ‘not answering’, I have followed the approach taken by Clayman and Heritage (2002) of identifying instances based on at least one of the participants in the interaction orienting to the reply as not answering the question. In examining the data, I was

struck by the challenging aspect of some of the questions preceding ‘not answering’, and the ways in which ministers attended to these challenges in their attempts at legitimating not answering. As a counterpoint to extracts examining attempts at legitimating not answering, I decided to include into the analysis an example of answering the question, as well as an example of the minister being repeatedly pursued for an answer. I therefore structured the analysis around these three cases (answering, legitimating not answering, not answering while being pursued for an answer), with the main focus being on the negotiated nature of ‘answering’ in the interactions between committee members and ministers across these three cases.

## 7.1 Answering questions: initial observations

I will begin by examining an instance in which the minister answers the question. Consider the extract below:

### Extract 1

The term ‘growth rate’ relates to the growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), an economic measure of the value added to materials and other inputs in the production of goods and services by resident organisations. Over the past decade, Scotland’s annual average growth rate was 2.2%, compared to 2.8% for the UK. This extract relates to the new SNP Government’s promise to increase Scotland’s economic growth rate to the UK level by 2011.

EETC, 27/06/07:2; 00:10:28-00:11:36

TS is Tavish Scott (LibDem MSP and Convenor of EETC); JM is Jim Mather (Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism)

1. TS: What are the specific measures you plan to take (.)
2. .h to- to build to that growth rate↓ (.) because it is (.)
3. as you’ve said uh ambitious.
4. JM: Well I mean the specific measures include things like- like
5. the- the business rates we- we- we recognise the limited nature
6. but (.) a I think g- galvanising (.) .h the elements of that portfolio↓ (.)
7. galvanising enterprise, galvanising tourism, .h galvanising energy,
8. and- and getting this key message across that
9. there’s a huge potential in- in- in the energy sector
10. to- to create more wealth, and retain more wealth in Scotland↓ (.)
11. .hh all of these things I think will- will- will play an important part (.)
12. .hh the bu- the business rates element of it

13. in- in terms of our uh >you know< small business bonus, (.)
14. uh which would take a hundred and twenty thousand small businesses
15. out of business rates (.) .h I think would be an-
16. another powerful element in boosting uh the economy,
17. .hh and also putting down an important si↑gnal (.)
18. and that important signal is one of >you know<
19. uh y:u if we could do this with business rates, (.)
20. think what we would do if we had further powers
21. to- to create the- the- the virtuous circle
22. of a more competitive Scotland (.)
23. able to grow its- (.) its- its- uh its economic growth,
24. able to grow its tax revenues over the- the longer term↓

In the above extract, the question contains three elements. First, the question asks the minister about ‘specific measures’ (line 1). Second, the question asks how the minister plans to enhance Scotland’s existing growth rate. Third, the question characterises the minister’s proposed growth rate as ‘ambitious’ (line 2), and substantiates this characterisation by attributing it to the minister himself. Given the three distinct elements of the question, the minister’s answer could focus on any one of these elements. However, the minister addresses each of the three aspects of the question. He addresses the request for ‘specific measures’ (line 1) by making relevant the government’s initiatives relating to business rates and the business bonus for small businesses. The minister also addresses how these initiatives have the potential to enhance Scotland’s existing growth rate by drawing out the consequences of these specific measures: ‘the business rates element [...] would take a hundred and twenty thousand small businesses out of business rates’ (lines 12-15). Finally, the minister addresses the issue of the ambitious nature of his proposals by describing the previously mentioned initiative as a ‘powerful element in boosting the economy’ (line 16), thereby implying that his goals are reachable despite being ambitious.

## 7.2 Accounting for not answering

Having examined an instance in which the minister does answer the question, in this section I will focus on three ways in which the ministers avoid answering questions.

### 7.2.1 Constructing the question as unfair

One way in which ministers avoid answering is by constructing the questions being asked as unfair. Consider the following extracts:

#### Extract 2

EEAC, 26/06/07:2; 00:19:18-00:19:04

IS is Ian Smith (LibDem MSP); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. IS: →>Can you perhaps< just outline (.) what the: priorities
2. of the SNP Government are (.) in relation to (.) Europe
3. →what- what are your priorities (.)
4. →and how those differ from the priorities that were (.)
5. .hh uh (.) previously (.) been promoted
6. by: the previous administration.
7. LF: Can I say to you um (.) that I've come along
8. to the committee this afternoon to talk generally (.)
9. about across the portfolio that's relevant to this committee. (.)
10. .hh we have not yet totally and completely formulated↑ (.)
11. uh our view of what should be our priorities,
12. I'm working very hard on that, (.)
13. .hh uh taking soundings and taking information
14. from m:any different people. (.)
15. .hh and it will come to this committee. (.)
16. .hh but I- I have to say I don't think it's entirely fair
17. after such a short time to expect me to come here (.)
18. .hh and lay out (.) uh the Government's priorities for Europe
19. in a very definitive manner.

### Extract 3

The first part of this extract was previously presented in chapter 5 as extract 14. Previous to this exchange, another committee member (Jeremy Purvis) had asked the minister for specific targets for the SNP Government's plans to reduce the number of pupils in P1 to P3 (primary 1 to primary 3) classes across Scotland down to eighteen. In replying to his question, the minister had assessed Jeremy Purvis' tone in asking the question as negative.

ELLCC, 27/06/07:2; 01:59:43-02:02:42

KM is Ken Mackintosh (Labour MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning); C is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC)

1. KM: I think it's (.) a bit unfair of- of >Fiona Hyslop< to-
2. to call Jeremy Purvis' >and others'< questions negative (.)
3. .hh >I mean< I think all members of the committee
4. have welcomed (.) the direction of travel↓ (.) .hh but (.)
5. there is a need for (.) greater- greater clarity here↓ (.)
6. .hh either it's a target (.) or it's not (.)
7. coz the trouble with saying (.) .hh it's all common sense
8. is that common sense varies unfortunately
9. from individual to individual↓ (.)
10. .hh and can I↑ ask the minister
11. to come back at some point to this committee (.)
12. with an exact- (.) uh with a >more< exact (.) definition
13. of what she means by flexibility (.)
14. .hh and what that- (.) what that actually means in terms of
15. the uh power of head teachers (.) to vary (.) the class size target (.)
16. an' I think it's very important in terms of (.) uh
17. our committee's scrutiny over this government's actions↓ (.)
18. so far (.) you've (.) given us (.) a target
19. >that's no longer a target< because it's flexible (.)
20. and you've also said that it's totally uncosted↓ (.)
21. now (.) I- I have to say at this stage that's quite unsatisfactory↓
22. now I'm quite willing to wait
23. until the (.) comprehensive spending review
24. but you must understand that is unsatisfactory↓ (.)
25. .hh and that (.) .hh >you know<
26. in areas like mine and like yours,
27. if I may say so (.) West Lothian↓ (.)
28. .hh uh many parents, (.) many parents
29. would r- rather have a larger class size
30. in a school that they can get into (.)
31. .h than a class size of eighteen↓ (.)
32. now that's a >fair (.) demand< from the parents↓ but is that
33. what we're actually saying is- is going to be allowed
34. because (.) that is what parents would like to see

35. in terms of common sense approach in some areas (.)  
 36. but I'm not sure that's what you think is  
 37. common [ sense ]  
 38. FH: [well (.)] I- I said repeatedly  
 39. that (.) I have to work with councils in the delivery of this↓ (.)  
 40. because obviously they're the local authorities  
 41. that uh administer schools and- and- are obviously the-  
 42. employ the teachers that we (.) need in order to  
 43. [cut the class sizes ]  
 44. KM: [the previous local] authorities- the previous executive  
 45. also had to work with local authorities  
 46. and you seem to be saying  
 47. it's the previous executive's fault (.)  
 48. for not getting (.) [the target of twenty-five which is-]  
 49. FH: [ well↓ yeah↓ I mean it- I mean it took] them-  
 50. and yeah it still hasn't been done yet  
 51. [I mean as I said-]  
 52. KM: [ well the target ] was in August I believe but uh=  
 53. FH: =well no↓ it's for next year↓ so the pupils that are sitting  
 54. in their final, you know the- the- the P ones  
 55. are currently sitting in classes (.) .hh sixty percent of them are in  
 56. classes that are way above uh twenty-five .hh but  
 57. [what I would- what I would- what I would say-]  
 58. [((murmurs in background))]  
 59. C: [ Is it forty- (.) Is it is it forty percent]=  
 60. FH: =Yes.=  
 61. C: =or sixty percent coz you said forty earlier on.  
 62. FH: All right forty percent↓ oh no sorry uh forty percent  
 63. are in classes that are bigger than uh twenty-five↓ okay? (.)  
 64. so sixty percent are probably sitting in classes of twenty-five↓  
 65. → .hh what- what I would- what I would say is that you've asked me  
 66. to come to the committee within five weeks of us coming into power↓  
 67. (.) .hh the last Minister for Education in the last administration (.)  
 68. .hh his first visit to the Parliament at the invitation of the committee  
 69. .hh was actually in October last year,  
 70. and it wasn't even about setting out- (.)  
 71. [.hh it wasn't even about setting out-]  
 72. [((murmurs in background ))]  
 73. it wasn't about setting out the programme for government,  
 74. .hh or the proposals or how they were going to implement things,  
 75. or what discussions had been taken place with local authorities, (.)  
 76. .hh it was actually about the budget process? (.)  
 77. .hh so one of the things I would say to you is that I very much welcome  
 78. the early opportunity to speak to you↓ (.) .hh but when you-  
 79. when you question me as to >you know<  
 80. give me the kind of roll-out dates for when things are gonna happen (.)  
 81. .hh I can't do that unless I've had those discussions  
 82. with local authorities first↓



I will begin by examining the committee members' questions. In extract 2, the committee member asks a two-part question. The first part of the question is initially formulated as '>can you perhaps< just outline [...] what the: priorities of the SNP government are' (lines 1-2), and then reformulated as 'what are your priorities' (line 3). The second part of the question is 'how those [your priorities] differ from the priorities that were [...] previously [...] been promoted by the previous administration' (lines 4-6). To note is that the first part of the question initially uses modifying features which make the question appear indirect ('>can you perhaps< just outline', line 1), but is subsequently reformulated with a more direct alternative: 'what are your priorities' (line 3). Through reformulating an indirect request into a more direct alternative, the question appears more confrontational and therefore challenging. Furthermore, the second part of the question ('how those [your priorities] differ', line 4) makes the minister accountable for identifying differences with the previous administration's priorities. In extract 3, two committee members (KM and C) interact with the minister. The question immediately preceding the minister's answer constitutes a request for clarification: 'is it is it forty [...] or sixty percent [...] coz you said forty earlier on' (lines 59-61). The minister answers this request only briefly before attending to KM's previous utterances. Therefore I will focus on the interaction between the minister and KM. In addressing the minister, KM highlights several aspects of the minister's behaviour as problematic: 'I think it's [...] a bit unfair [...] of >Fiona Hyslop<' (line 1); 'you've [...] given us [...] a target >that's no longer a target<' (lines 18-19); 'you've also said that it's totally uncosted↓' (line 20). Furthermore, KM makes a negative assessment of the minister's behaviour: 'I have to say [...] that's quite unsatisfactory↓' (line 21) and 'you must understand that is unsatisfactory↓' (line 24).

The committee members' questions, then, contain challenging elements. In responding to the committee members, the ministers avoid answering by attending to the challenging elements of the questions. The ministers accomplish this by constructing the committee members' questions as unfair. In extract 2, the minister does so explicitly: 'I don't think it's entirely fair after such a short time to expect me

to come here [...] and lay out [...] the government's priorities' (lines 16-18). Furthermore, the minister indirectly contrasts her own intention in coming to the committee 'to talk generally about across the portfolio' (lines 8-9) with her construction of the request to 'lay out [...] the government's priorities [...] in a very definitive manner' (lines 18-19). The use of 'very definitive' (line 19) makes the inference available that the question is asking for the impossible (and is therefore unfair), as there is nothing beyond definitive. In extract 3, the minister initially attempts to attend to the challenging aspects of KM's turn by attributing responsibility elsewhere. The minister accomplishes this through 'I said repeatedly [...] I have to work with councils in the delivery of this↓' (lines 38-39) and 'local authorities [...] administer schools and [...] employ the teachers that we [...] need' (lines 40-42). However, the minister's attempt to attribute blame elsewhere is challenged by KM through recharacterising the situation as one in which 'the previous executive also had to work with local authorities' (lines 44-45). This constructs the minister as being on an equal level playing field with the previous administration, thereby making her accountable for not being able to provide the answer. To deal with this challenge, the minister works up the implication of unfairness by setting up an indirect contrast between herself and her predecessor (i.e. a member of the previous executive referred to by KM) in relation to when each of them was first asked to answer the committee's questions. In particular, the contrast indicates that the present minister was asked before the committee 'within five weeks of us coming into power↓' (line 66). This is contrasted with 'the last minister [...] his first visit [...] was actually in October last year' (lines 67-69). The use of 'in October last year' (line 69) indicates that the previous minister was first asked before the committee after having been in power for approximatively three years, which by comparison to 'within five weeks of us coming into power↓' (lines 66) indicates that the present minister was asked to answer questions within a significantly shorter time-span. Furthermore, the use of 'you've asked me to come to the committee' (lines 65-66) and 'his first visit [...] at the invitation of the committee' (line 68) identify the committee as having been responsible for the timing of the invitation to both ministers. The contrast between the timing of the previous and the present minister's first visit therefore serves to indirectly construct the committee as

discriminating against the present minister. The minister further emphasises the implication of unfairness by listing what the previous minister was (not) asked about ('it wasn't about setting out the programme for government [...] or the proposals or how they were going to implement things, or what discussions had been taken place with local authorities', lines 73-75) before describing what he *was* asked about: 'it was actually about the budget process' (line 76). Listing both what the previous was not asked as well as what he was asked about substantiates the minister's construction of the question as unfair by indicating that she was asked for more details than her predecessor.

While constructing the questions as unfair, the ministers also attend to the interactionally problematic aspects of not providing an answer. The ministers do so in three ways. The first way is through using a range of features to make their answers appear indirect. In particular, the ministers in both extracts use modifying features: 'can I say to you' (extract 2, line 7); 'what I would say' (extract 3, line 65); 'one of the things I would say to you' (extract 3, line 77). Furthermore, the use of the verb 'can' (line 7) in extract 2, and the use of the conditional tense in extract 3, both serve to make the responses less direct.

A second way in which the ministers attend to the problematic aspects of not answering is by addressing potential accusations. In extract 2, the minister addresses the potential accusation that she has not invested enough effort in gathering the information needed to provide an answer. The minister attends to this possibility through 'I'm working very hard on that [...] taking soundings and taking information from m:any different people' (lines 12-14). This indicates that the minister is doing all she can to gather the information. The modifying features 'working very hard' (line 12) and 'm:any different people' (line 14) both serve to emphasise the minister's construction of herself as hard-working and thorough. In extract 3, the minister attends to the possible accusation that she is unwilling to answer questions through 'I very much welcome the early opportunity to speak to you↓' (lines 77-78). The modifying feature 'I very much welcome' (line 77) serves to emphasise the minister's statement. Furthermore, the use of 'early opportunity' (line 78) serves to frame the short time span in positive terms, thereby attending to her reply being perceived as a criticism of the committee.

A third way in which the ministers attend to not providing an answer is by indicating that the answer will be provided at a later date. In extract 2, the minister uses ‘totally’ (line 10) and ‘completely’ (line 10) in ‘we have not yet totally and completely formulated↑[...] our view of what should be our priorities’ (lines 10-11). The use of these extreme case formulations serves to imply the rhetorical alternative that the priorities asked for by the committee member have almost been finalised (cf. Billig, 1996), therefore that they will be available to the committee in the near future. In extract 3, the minister constructs having discussions with local authorities as crucial to providing an answer: ‘I can’t do that unless I’ve had those discussions with local authorities first↓’ (lines 81-82). This implies that an answer will be provided after the discussions with local authorities have taken place.

In this section, then, I have shown that one way in which ministers avoid answering questions is by constructing these as unfair. The analysis also showed a variety of ways in which ministers attended to the interactionally problematic aspects of not providing an answer. In particular, ministers used a range of features (e.g. modifying terms, conditional tense) to make their replies appear indirect, pre-empt potential accusations, and indicate that an answer will be provided at a later date.

### **7.2.2 Involving the convenor**

Another way in which ministers legitimate avoiding answering questions is by involving the convenor. Consider the following extracts:

#### Extract 4

This exchange follows a series of interactions between JP and the minister in which JP holds the minister accountable to abolish the medical tuition fees applied to non-Scottish domiciled medical students. The minister had previously indicated that abolishing the fees does not constitute a priority for the SNP Government.

ELLCC, 27/06/07:2; 02:22:10-02:23:49

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning); C is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC)

1. JP: Do you- have you costed what the change would be
2. for- just for the medical fees↓ (.) .hh coz I- I th- the issue=
3. FH: =hhhhh=
4. JP: =[I und-]
5. FH: =[I think-]
6. JP: I understand that you've made (.)
7. the connection between the two (.)
8. um there's a distinction at times
9. when you said that the application of fees
10. to (.) .hh English Welsh and Northern Ireland students (.)
11. .h studying within Scotland↓ (.)
12. having- them having to pay the fees↓ (.) that were (.)
13. uh introduced↓ (.) .hh u:m that was (.) discriminatory (.) u:m (.)
14. there's the separate issue with regards to the increase
15. in the medical fees (.) .hh uh that English (.)
16. uh Welsh and Northern Ireland uh=
17. FH: =>Fifteen hundred< pound more mhm=
18. JP: =So- (.) and how many students does that apply↑ to
19. FH: .hhh (0.2) Perhaps↑ Convenor uh (.) I think your invitation
20. was for me to come to outline
21. what this government wants to do
22. and what our priorities for this government are↓ (.)
23. .hh (.) we could spend a lot of time discussing the problems
24. of the last government in introducing (.) uh top-up fees
25. for (.) English students (.) .hh but (.) I've no intention
26. to make any movement on that
27. because we've got other priorities
28. um set out so (.) .hh perhaps uh uh
29. >you know I< appeal to your-
30. your judgement as to how best to drive this forward
31. that we could spend a lot of time discussing
32. the last government↓, perhaps what we should do
33. is spending more time (.) .hh >you know<
34. you questioning us about what our p- actual plans are (.)
35. .hh and the proposals that I've presented to you this morning↓
36. C: (.) Absolutely↓ (.) however, um Mister Purvis

37.               does have a right to ask  
38. FH: [mhm]  
39. C: [you ] your questions, a- and it's your right to uh to=  
40. FH: Yeah no that's fi(hhhh)ne↓it's just- [hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh] [to answer them]  
41. C:  
42. I would- [I'm conscious I- ]  
43. FH: [repetition that's all↓]=  
44. C: =I'm very conscious that our- uh  
45. that time is marching on  
46. and the minister has been very indulgent↑(.)  
47. uhm with her- her time↓(.) u:m(.) so I would ask  
48. um Mister Purvis to:(.) wind up his line of questioning.

University Scotland is the representative body of Scotland's 21 universities and higher education colleges. The extract relates to the concerns expressed by Universities Scotland and raised by several of the committee members, that the budget allocated by the Scottish Government to universities for the following academic year represents a real-term cut. This extract follows the minister's answer to a previous question, in which she stated that this situation had arisen due to the extremely tight budget allocated by the UK Government, and implying that she did not know that this situation would arise.

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning); C is Karen Whitefield (Labour MSP and Convenor of ELLCC)

17. FH: (.) .hhh Well↓ if you-  
 18. it depends if you provide-  
 19. and again we go back I suppose into the historic argument  
 20. as to .hh whether you want to uh recognise  
 21. that the impact of the hundred million pounds that we've given  
 22. this year from .hh the end-year flexibility (.) .hh um will have an  
 23. impact in future [years um ]  
 24. JP: [That's got nothing] to do with pay,  
 25. that's got nothing to do [with pay  
 26. FH: [No it's not  
 27. but I mean it's all to do with indepen- za::  
 28. I don't have a- (.) Convenor I don't have a-  
 29. I don't think you want me to have a-  
 30. C: No↓ (.)  
 31. FH: hhhh[hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh]  
 32. C: [I don't want to] um  
 33. JP: [Apologies, apologies]  
 34. C: I don't want an argument=  
 35. FH: =No↓=  
 36. C: going back and forward↓  
 37. I'd much rather that the members ask questions,  
 38. the minister responded.

In each of the two extracts, the minister allocates the next speaking turn to the convenor at the point where her interaction with JP becomes problematic. In extract 4, the minister turns to the convenor after having replied to one of JP's earlier challenging questions and subsequently being confronted with another challenging follow-up question from JP. In extract 5, the minister turns to the convenor after attempting to answer JP's previous questions and being confronted with another challenging follow-up question. The hesitation and repair ('I don't have a-', line 28) before allocating the next speaking turn to the convenor both indicate that responding to JP's latest follow-up question is interactionally problematic. In both extracts, selecting the convenor as the next speaker therefore serves to avoid answering JP's series of follow-up questions.

An examination of the earlier interaction between the minister and JP provides further evidence for the above argument. In both extracts, JP confronts the minister with specific challenges. In extract 4, JP initially asks a question related to action: 'have you costed what the change would be [...] just for the medical fees↓' (lines 1-

2). The question constructs accountability for making a change as dependent on cost, thereby making the minister accountable for not taking action if the cost turns out not to be prohibitive. As the minister had previously indicated that she does not intend to make the suggested change, being made accountable for not taking action represents a challenge. JP presents a further challenge by providing a formulation of the minister's previous argument for not taking action ('I understand that you've made [...] the connection between the two', lines 6-7) and subsequently undermining it through a counter-argument (lines 6-16). In extract 5, JP's initial turn constructs the submission by University Scotland as 'itemised [...] and included staffing' (line 2), thereby making the inference available that the minister had been made aware that a particular ministerial action (the budget allocated to University Scotland) would become a problem at a later date.

In both extracts, the minister initially attempts to address the challenges. In extract 4, the minister addresses JP's question related to the cost of taking action through '>fifteen hundred< pound' (line 17). In extract 5, the minister addresses the challenge by initially confirming JP's point through 'yeah↓' (line 3), but subsequently undermining it through attributing the reason for the problem elsewhere: 'the: pressures [...] are [...] more acute because [of] [...] the tight settlement' (lines 4-6).

After the minister addresses the initial challenge, however, JP follows up with related counter-points. In extract 4, JP accomplishes this through the question 'how many students does that apply↑ to' (line 18), introducing the possibility that due to low numbers of eligible students, the cost of taking action is not prohibitive. In extract 5, JP introduces two counter-arguments: 'but you would have known that before you would have given them a real-term cut next year' (lines 15-16) and 'that's got nothing to do with pay' (line 25). The use of 'you would have known' (line 15) undermines the minister's earlier attribution of the problem elsewhere by implying that the minister did not plan ahead and that the cut she is implementing is a result of her own lack of planning rather than others' fault. Furthermore, 'that's got nothing to do with pay' (line 25) dismisses the minister's counter-argument as irrelevant to the problem being highlighted.



By selecting the convenor as the next speaker, then, the minister avoids having to respond to JP's counter-arguments. The minister accomplishes this in three ways. First, the minister implies that the convenor would not want her to provide an answer. In extract 4, 'convenor [...] I think your invitation was for me to [...] outline what this government wants to do' (lines 19-21) constructs the situation as one in which JP's questions do not match the purpose of the convenor's invitation, thereby implying that the convenor would not want the minister to continue responding to JP. In extract 5, a similar purpose is served by 'convenor I don't have a- I don't think you want me to have a-' (lines 28-29).

Another way in which the minister uses involving the convenor to avoid answering to JP, in extract 14, is by constructing the situation as one in which the convenor has to make a choice. The minister accomplishes this through 'I appeal to [...] your judgement as to how best to drive this forward' (lines 29-30), thereby attributing responsibility to the convenor for the development of the interaction with the committee members (including JP). The minister also establishes a contrast between 'we could spend a lot of time discussing the last government↓' (lines 31-32) and 'perhaps what we should do is spending more time [...] you questioning us about what our [...] actual plans are' (lines 32-34). In laying out the two options, the minister undermines one option in favour of the other. The minister accomplishes this through the repair 'what our p- actual plans are' (line 34). The use of 'actual' (line 34) introduced through the repair serves to imply that the issues raised by JP's questions have no bearing on the government's real priorities and are thereby irrelevant to the discussion.

In both extracts, then, the minister uses the category 'convenor' as a way to legitimise interrupting JP's line of questioning. As defined by Sacks and Schegloff (1973), category entitlements refer to certain categories of actors being treated as entitled to particular knowledge or (in this case) prerogatives, and are thus expected to act on the basis of these special characteristics. In the context of Scottish Parliament committee meetings, the convenor's responsibilities include keeping discussions focused, allocating questioning turns, and ensuring that all participants are treated fairly during these discussions. In making relevant the category

‘convenor’, the minister implies that the convenor has both the authority and the duty to stop JP’s line of questioning.

The function of the category ‘convenor’ (because of its entitlement) is also shown in the way in which the convenor orients to the minister’s turn. In extract 4, the convenor attends to the minister’s orientation towards her as arbitrator. The convenor accomplishes this by initially using ‘absolutely↓’ (line 36) as if to agree with the minister’s arguments against JP’s line of questioning, but subsequently making relevant the rights of the various parties: ‘however, [...] Mister Purvis does have a right to ask [...] you your questions [...] and it’s your right to [...] answer them↓’ (lines 36-41). Through making relevant JP’s right to ask questions, the convenor displays her orientation to the category of ‘convenor’ as arbitrator, and also uses this prerogative to defend JP’s line of questioning based on providing a particular construction of the rules of committee meetings that substantiate her defence. Furthermore, although subsequently cutting short JP’s line of questioning, the convenor accounts for doing so through making relevant time constraints rather than the minister’s criticism: ‘I’m very conscious that [...] time is marching on’ (lines 44-45). Through selecting time constraints over the reasons provided by the minister, the convenor orients to her role as arbitrator by dismissing the minister’s criticisms against JP. In extract 5, the convenor also orients to her role as arbitrator by judging in favour or against various parties. The convenor intervenes in the discussion by confirming the minister’s characterisation of JP’s line of questioning (‘no↓ [...] I don’t want an argument [...] going back and forward↓’, lines 30-36) and laying down rules: ‘I’d much rather that the members ask questions, the minister responded↓’ (lines 37-38).

### **7.2.3 Indicating that an answer will be provided at a later date**

In the previous section, I have examined instances in which the ministers involve the convenor as a way of avoiding to answer. Another way in which ministers avoid answering questions is by indicating that an answer will be provided at a later date. Consider the following extracts:

## Extract 6

KM's question relates to the SNP Government's pledge to reduce the number of pupils in P1 to P3 (primary 1 to 3) classes down to eighteen, which involves building several new schools. The term 'spending review' relates to a review of the financial resources available to the Scottish Government for implementing their manifesto and other initiatives, due to be carried out by the SNP Scottish Government.

ELLCC, 27/06/07:2; 01:18:39-01:18:58

KM is Ken Macintosh (Labour MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. KM: Once the spending review has reported↓ (.)
2. → do you expect to put a target (.) o:n
3. the number of schools that you would hope to build?
4. FH: e:::h Well again it's an issue of >working with local authorities↓<
5. I know that many of them are working up
6. what their future programmes ar- are
7. and what they'd want to have and I think
8. we need to hear from them as to what their p- progressions are↓

## Extract 7

This extract relates to the 'European Strategy', which is the Scottish Government's framework for guiding work on issues relating to the European Union at the broadest level.

EEAC, 18/09/07:4; 02:34:44-02:35:43

JB is Jackie Baillie (Labour MSP and Convenor for EEAC); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JB: I'm quite clear that (.) >you know<, the- the- the rhetoric
2. is around about the political objectives. (.) .hh and
3. we've got themes for those. (.)
4. → .hh what we don't have is detail, (.)
5. .hh u:m and I wonder when that will emerge, (.)
6. → .hh um is that intended to be part of the European Strategy,
7. but- but- fur↑ther to that (.) .hh and I think key. (.)
8. i::s (.) how do your six political objectives (.) actually relate
9. to the dossiers, (.) because I get the sen↑se (.)
10. .hh that (.) >you know< (.) it is simply a watching brief
11. on the current EU priorities. (.)
12. .hh if you look at some of the descriptions, (.)
13. .hh >you know<, of what the government is doing, (.)
14. it is about the Scottish Government negotiating with the UK (.)
15. .hh to ensure that Scottish interests (.) .hh are paramount. (.)

16. um (.) I don't think that's sufficient detail
17. to get a real understanding (.) o:f (.)
18. >you know< what you're trying to do.
19. LF: I- (.) I- I think as I said earlier,
20. we will bring the full European Strategy to you.
21. we intend for it to be part of the conversation that we're having (.)
22. .hh and I hope this committee will very much play (.)
23. .hh uh their part in contributing (.) .hh to that conversation. (.)
24. .hh uh:m (.) the longer-term political goals...

### Extract 8

This exchange relates to the SNP's manifesto pledge for Scotland to retain more of the fee raised by the BBC from those residing in Scotland.

ELLC, 27/06/07:2; 00:28:43-00:29:03

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JP: Just wondering whether or not you (.) intend (.)
2. ((clearing his throat)) as a Scottish Government,
3. asking the (.) .h BBC Trust (.) to reconfigure
4. part of the expenditure (.) .hh so that Scotland
5. does retain more of the license fee raised in Scotland
6. which is in your (.) manifesto.
7. LF: (0.2) Obviously we(hh)'ll (.) we'll discuss these issues
8. at the appropriate time and with the appropriate peo↑ple.

### Extract 9

This extract relates to the SNP's manifesto pledge to release a White Paper (a governmental document) outlining the possibility of Scotland gaining independence from the UK Government.

EEAC, 26/06/07:2; 01:12:03-01:12:50

JB is Jackie Baillie (Labour MSP and Convenor for EEAC); LF is Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

1. JB: I understand that within your first hundred days
2. you'll bring forward an independence White Paper. (.)
3. .hh u:h that is something I think that this committee
4. may well↑ have an interest in.=
5. LF: =Mhm. mhm.
6. →JB: Are you the ministerial lead for that (.)

7. .hh um and indeed, (.) >you know<, just out of mischievousness, (.)
8. .hh um I understand that the first draft was written
9. by Alex Neil way back in January=
10. = [(( laughter in the background))]
11. → [are you building on that first draft? or perhaps you have ] (.)
12. a different approach, Minister.
13. LF: uh the first minister's office will be leading (.) on that.=
14. →JB: =so is the First Minister?
15. (.)
16. LF: the first minister's office.
17. (.)
18. JB: okay (.) [we'll pass the-] sorry.
19. LF: [ you ' ll- ]
20. JB: I'm looking for absolute clarity.
21. → who is the minister in charge of that? (.)
22. because you're part of the first minister's office=
23. LF: =mhm=
24. →JB: =so I'm just looking for clarity as to, (.) >you know<. which minister is it?
25. LF: the office of the first minister will be responsible for that,
26. and when appropriate we'll let you know
27. who's (.) leading on it.

The interaction between the committee members and the ministers in the above extract warrant two observations. First, most of the committee members' questions in these extracts request a yes/no answer: 'is that [the detail] intended to be part of the European strategy' (extract 7, line 6); 'do you expect to put a target' (extract 6, line 2); 'just wondering whether or not you [...] intend [...] asking the [...] BBC Trust [...] to reconfigure part of the expenditure' (extract 8, lines 1-4); 'are you the ministerial lead for that [the paper]' (extract 9, line 6); 'are you building on that first draft?' (extract 9, line 11). However, the ministers do not provide a yes/no answer to any of these questions. Instead, they legitimate not answering the questions by referring to the future. In extracts 6 and 7, this is accomplished by indicating that it is not possible to provide an answer without others' input. In extract 6, the minister establishes the answer to the question as dependent on 'working with local authorities↓' (line 4). The use of the present tense serves to indicate that action for providing an answer is ongoing: 'many of them are working up what their future programmes [...] are' (lines 5-6). By indirectly framing the delay in positive terms through reference to ongoing action, the minister makes it appear less problematic. Furthermore, the minister says that 'we need to hear from them as to what their [...]

progressions are↓’ (line 8), thereby indicating that it is impossible to provide an answer without first obtaining the input from local authorities. In extract 7, the minister constructs the detail of the EU strategy as intended to emerge out of discussions with stakeholders, therefore making it problematic to provide an answer to the question without this input. Furthermore, the minister indicates that ‘we will bring the full European strategy to you’ (line 20), thereby orienting towards the future. In extracts 8 and 9, the minister also refers to the future. The minister accomplishes this by indicating that the situation is not appropriate for providing an answer. In extract 8, this is done through ‘we’ll discuss these issues at the appropriate time and with the appropriate people.’ (lines 7-8). In extract 9, the minister does not immediately construct the situation as inappropriate for providing an answer, as in extract 8. Instead, she initially provides details that are relevant to answering the question: ‘the first minister’s office be leading [...] on that’ (line 13). By identifying the department leading on the paper, but not confirming or disconfirming her own involvement, the minister’s reply does not answer the committee member’s question. The committee member subsequently makes three follow-up attempts to obtain an answer relating to the authorship of the governmental paper. Initially, the minister deals with these attempts by repeating her initial answer with a different word order: ‘the first minister’s office’ (line 16); ‘the office of the first minister will be responsible for that’ (line 25). It is only after the committee member’s third attempt that the minister legitimates not answering by constructing the situation as inappropriate: ‘when appropriate we’ll let you know’ (line 26). In both extracts 8 and 9, the minister’s utterances are characterised by vagueness. The use of ‘appropriate time’ (extract 8, line 8), ‘appropriate people’ (extract 8, line 8), and ‘when appropriate’ (extract 9, line 26) make it difficult to hold the minister accountable for providing an answer at a later date, because she does not specify when an answer will be provided.

One strategy for avoiding answering questions, then, is to indicate that an answer will be provided at a future date. This serves to downplay the need for the minister to answer the question at the present moment. Furthermore, use of vagueness allows the minister to avoid being made accountable for providing an

answer by a particular time, while the repetition of a particular reply (not addressing the question) can be used to ward off further attempts at pursuing an answer.

### 7.3 Not answering while being pursued for an answer

In the previous sections, I have examined different ways in which ministers avoid answering questions. In this final section, I will examine an interaction where the committee member does not allow the minister to avoid answering the question. To show the turn-by-turn sequence, I will begin by presenting the entire interaction below. Consider the following extract:

#### Extract 10

Lines 40-48 in this extract were previously presented in chapter 4 as extract 12. This extract relates to the SNP Government's decision to take the administration of the skills agenda away from the college sector and to restructure it at the national level.

ELLCC, 26/09/07:5; 03:40:05-03:50:38

JP is Jeremy Purvis (LibDem MSP); FH is Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

1. JP: I'd just (.) like to ask
2. if you will publish (.) .hh the consultation
3. responses that have been calling
4. for the local (.) .hh skills functions to be- to be removed
5. from the local enterprise companies↓
6. FH: (0.2) Well the (.) aspects of the: Scottish Enterprise u:m
7. and the Enterprise Network huh announced review .hh um (.)
8. is a responsibility of: u:m my colleague John Swinney↓=
9. =now he'll- he's making a statement this afternoon
10. in the Chamber on this subject↓
11. .hh I've (.) given you: (.) the information I can (.)
12. .hh and (.) announced just now
13. about the skills and training aspects↓
14. moving over to the national body↓
15. but I'm not in a position to be able to
16. go into detail about the local delivery aspects↓
17. JP: (.) .h Cabinet Secretary↓ (.) you did say (.) quite clearly (.)
18. that the consultation responses (.) .h were in favour↓ (.)
19. of a national skills agency↓ (.) .h with-
20. and- (.) transferring the (.) local skills (.) functions↓ (.)
21. to a national body↓ (.)

22. .h and I'm asking you to publish  
 23. those consultation responses  
 24. FH: (.) .hh Well↓ (.) the- there was a- a- (.) a report produced  
 25. 'it's not u:m a full options appraisal° by the last government↓ (.)  
 26. the last government did .hh u:m request PAYE Consulting  
 27. to: (.) uh produce a cost-benefit analysis of local delivery  
 28. as ov- as- as opposed to national delivery (.)  
 29. .hh and it is our intention to publish that↓ (.)  
 30. .hh I think one of the things that you have to be aware of  
 31. is the- the cost benefits .hh would mean  
 32. for example↓ if you are wanting to deliver Careers Scotland (.)  
 33. .hh um in a local authority basis↓ (.) .h the cost to local authorities  
 34. would be a hundred million pounds (.)  
 35. as estimated, which I think (.)  
 36. if you're asking local authorities to find cuts in the budgets  
 37. elsewhere, (.) .hh to accommodate that (.) I think you'd find um  
 38. there'd be quite a bit of resistance  
 39. particularly .hh um up on that (.) uh financial (.) argument↓  
 40. JP: Cabinet Secretary, you- you- you told the committee (.)  
 41. that there was (.) consultation responses (.)  
 42. that favoured the removal (.) of the local skills (.) functions (.)  
 43. .h into a national body↓ (0.2)  
 44. now I'm not picking up (.) that (.) you're in a position  
 45. to publish that↑ (.) am I right in saying  
 46. that there's actually is no consultation responses↓ (.)  
 47. .hh to removing the local enterprise functions (.) for skills↓ (.)  
 48. into a national skills agency↓=  
 49. FH: =uh (.) I said=  
 50. JP: =if there was, why- why aren't you (.)  
 51. going to publish them?  
 52. FH: Well↓ (.) can I say that uh this morning on radio  
 53. we had Peter Hughes, Chief Executive  
 54. of Scottish Engineering, (.)  
 55. .hh he commented that we think it's, skills and training,  
 56. can be done very well↓ somewhere like Learndirect↓ (.)  
 57. .h Scotland under Careers Scotland and take it away from  
 58. the day-to-day things↓ that  
 59. Scottish Enterprise have to focus on↓ (.)  
 60. .hh ((reading)) we've got to engage with employers, educators,  
 61. schools, colleges, universities, and so on↓ (.) ((finishes reading))  
 62. .hh so there has been a lot of support↓ (.) for the eh:  
 63. >you know< removal of the skills and training elements (.)  
 64. from Scottish Enterprise to something that uh  
 65. I know that uh (.) colleagues uh will be aware (.)  
 66. .h has been the subject of discussions for some time,  
 67. and indeed (.) .hh I think if you looked  
 68. at the manifestoes (.) .hh of all the four major parties, (.)  
 69. that they all had an indication, (.) .hh that they would



70. want to bring together (.) different agencies↓  
 71. uh whether it's a full-blown agency under Labour,  
 72. whether it's uh the Conservative's proposal  
 73. to do I think exactly what we've done,  
 74. which is Learndirect, um Careers Scotland  
 75. and the Skills and Training aspects, and  
 76. I think indeed yourselves, .hh you had an aspect  
 77. you wouldn't have necessarily  
 78. taken the skills and training,  
 79. so I think three out of the four  
 80. u:m parties going to election (.)  
 81. .hh um had policies that were very similar to this↓  
 82. JP: Convenor (inaudible)  
 83. I- I- I do wish to press you, Cabinet Secretary, (.)  
 84. you- you told the committee, (.)  
 85. .hh that the >consul<tation (.) >responses< (.)  
 86. were in >favour< (.) of removing this function (.)  
 87. into a national body↓  
 88. FH: (0.2) uh [the- the-  
 89. JP: [now what was the consultation  
 90. and will you publish the consultation responses?]  
 91. FH: [Well↓ the- the- ]  
 92. the Careers Scotland consultation↓ (.)  
 93. had a number of responses .hh that suggested  
 94. that that would be the best .hh way forward  
 95. JP: Have you carried out↓ (.)  
 96. a consultation↓ (.) with regards =  
 97. FH: =The consultation was carried out  
 98. by the previous government↓  
 99. JP: (0.3) Well↓ (.) Cabinet Secretary,  
 100. you just told the committee this morning↓ (.)  
 101. that the consultation responses for this decision (.)  
 102. .hh were in favour of it↓ (.)  
 103. FH: I said-  
 104. JP: And now you've just said that you haven't (.)  
 105. it was a previous government's consultation  
 106. FH: The- the- con- there was a- there was-  
 107. there was a consultation on Careers Scotland (.)  
 108. JP: But=  
 109. FH: =That was primarily the one that was  
 110. initiated by Nicol Stephen  
 111. JP: I asked about the local enterprise functions for skills  
 112. FH: I [know  
 113. JP: [Forgive me for interrupting  
 114. for skills, transferring to a national agency↓ (.)  
 115. and you said↓ the consultation responses  
 116. were in favour [of that↓]  
 117. FH: [I think-] I think you might be-

118. what I've said to you that I cannot go into details of  
 119. .hh the review of the- of the Enterprise Networks↓  
 120. because that's subject to a statement  
 121. by my colleague this afternoon  
 122. and that's what I've said  
 123. .hh I cannot and will not provide you information on that,  
 124. I had suggested to .hh the Committee Convenor  
 125. that precisely because of that it might have been helpful  
 126. to have had .hh this session at another time,  
 127. but I'm: more than happy to- (.) to be here today (.)  
 128. to answer questions↓  
 (some lines missing, in which the convenor intervenes, then lets JP continue  
 with line of questioning)  
 129. JP: [I'm grateful uh Convenor  
 130. because it does .hh actually impact  
 131. on I think part of u:m the consideration of this afternoon.  
 132. let me be very clear then↓ (.) have- (.)  
 133. did you (.) carry out (.) a >consultation<↓ (.)  
 134. on the >transfer< of the skills functions↓ (.)  
 135. from the local enterprise companies↓ (.)  
 136. into a national (.) agency↓  
 137. FH: (0.2) The review of the Scottish  
 138. Enterprise Networks as a Net- Network  
 139. has been carried out by my colleagues John Swinney  
 140. and Jim Mather↓ (.) and a statement of that  
 141. will be made this afternoon↓  
 142. JP: (0.2) I- I- I'm (.) sorry (.) Convenor (.)  
 143. I'm not s:ure- I'm not sure  
 144. that it is appropriate for a cabinet secretary  
 145. to make an announcement to the committee↓ (.)  
 146. in good↑ faith (.) about a decision  
 147. that had been taken by Government (.)  
 148. .hh on the transfer of the skills function  
 149. from enterprise companies to a national agency↓ (.)  
 150. .hh and the Cabinet Secretary chose to tell that  
 151. to the committee (.) this↓ morning↓ (.)  
 152. and now is refusing to answer↓ (.) whether or not  
 153. that decision (.) which she has announced  
 154. to the committee this morning↓ (.)  
 155. .hh was based on a consultation↓ (.)  
 156. FH: (.) We drew together consultatio-  
 157. a variety of consultations↓ (.)  
 158. .hh part of the consultations have been  
 159. the work of my colleagues on the Enterprise Networks, (.)  
 160. .hh part of the consultations were  
 161. on the modern apprenticeship review↓ (.)  
 162. carried out by the last government, (.)  
 163. part of the consultation was on the Lifelong Learning Strategy

164. refresh (.) .hh uh started by the last uh government↓ (.)  
 165. .hh and also the Careers Scotland consultations↓  
 166. so there'd been a number of consultations on this whole area↓ (.)  
 167. .hh one >of the< things that I was given  
 168. a clear uh °indication of° (.)  
 169. .hh by uh those in this area↓ (.) whether it's employers, (.)  
 170. whether it's from- from colleges, universities, etcetera was (.)  
 171. can you just produce the Skills Strategy↓ (.)  
 172. .hh we're fed up being overconsulta- con- consulted (.)  
 173. .hh and we want to make sure  
 174. that we have a skills strategy that can take us forward↓ (.)  
 175. .hh now that uh uh I don't know  
 176. how many consultations you need↓ (.)  
 177. .hh but I think between the ones that have taken place  
 178. .hh on the Enterprise Networks by my colleagues (.)  
 179. .hh and the prior ones uh  
 180. that certainly has provided us with a great deal-  
 181. wealth of information (.) and consultation (.)  
 182. as to the way forward↓

### 7.3.1 Accounting for pursuing an answer

I will begin by examining the way in which JP legitimates pursuing an answer during his interaction with the minister. Consider the following extracts:

#### Extract 10.1

03:42:28-03:43:19

1. JP: I'd just (.) like to ask
2. if you will publish (.) .hh the consultation
3. responses that have been calling
4. for the local (.) .hh skills functions to be- to be removed
5. from the local enterprise companies↓

#### Extract 10.2

03:43:20-03:44.21

17. JP: (.) .h Cabinet Secretary↓ (.) you did say (.) quite clearly (.)
18. that the consultation responses (.) .h were in favour↓ (.)
19. of a national skills agency↓ (.) .h with-
20. and- (.) transferring the (.) local skills (.) functions↓ (.)
21. to a national body↓ (.)

22. .h and I'm asking you to publish  
 23. those consultation responses

### Extract 10.3

03:44:22-03:45:52

40. JP: Cabinet Secretary, you- you- you told the committee (.)  
 41. that there was (.) consultation responses (.)  
 42. that favoured the removal (.) of the local skills (.) functions (.)  
 43. .h into a national body↓ (0.2)  
 44. now I'm not picking up (.) that (.) you're in a position  
 45. to publish that↑ (.) am I right in saying  
 46. that there's actually is no consultation responses↓ (.)  
 47. .hh to removing the local enterprise functions (.) for skills↓ (.)  
 48. into a national skills agency↓=  
 49. FH: =uh (.) I said=  
 50. JP: =if there was, why- why aren't you (.)  
 51. going to publish them?

### Extract 10.4

03:45:53-03:46:16

82. JP: Convenor (inaudible)  
 83. I- I- I do wish to press you, Cabinet Secretary, (.)  
 84. you- you told the committee, (.)  
 85. .hh that the >consul<tation (.) >responses< (.)  
 86. were in >favour< (.) of removing this function (.)  
 87. into a national body↓  
 88. FH: (0.2) uh [the- the-  
 89. JP: [now what was the consultation  
 90. and will you publish the consultation responses?]

### Extract 10.5

03:46:17-03:46:21

95. JP: Have you carried out↓ (.)  
 96. a consultation↓ (.) with regards =

### Extract 10.6

03:46:23-03:46:45

99. JP: (0.3) Well↓ (.) Cabinet Secretary,  
100. you just told the committee this morning↓ (.)  
101. that the consultation responses for this decision (.)  
102. .hh were in favour of it↓ (.)  
103. FH: I said-  
104. JP: And now you've just said that you haven't (.)  
105. it was a previous government's consultation

### Extract 10.7

03:46:46-03:47:15

111. JP: I asked about the local enterprise functions for skills  
112. FH: I [know  
113. JP: [Forgive me for interrupting  
114. for skills, transferring to a national agency↓ (.)  
115. and you said↓ the consultation responses  
116. were in favour [of that↓]

### Extract 10.8

03:47:16-03:47:58

129. JP: [I'm grateful uh Convenor  
130. because it does .hh actually impact  
131. on I think part of u:m the consideration of this afternoon.  
132. let me be very clear then↓ (.) have- (.)  
133. did you (.) carry out (.) a >consultation<↓ (.)  
134. on the >transfer< of the skills functions↓ (.)  
135. from the local enterprise companies↓ (.)  
136. into a national (.) agency↓

### Extract 10.9

03:49:08-03:50:33

142. JP: (0.2) I- I- I'm (.) sorry (.) Convenor (.)  
143. I'm not s:ure- I'm not sure  
144. that it is appropriate for a cabinet secretary  
145. to make an announcement to the committee↓ (.)  
146. in good↑ faith (.) about a decision  
147. that had been taken by Government (.)  
148. .hh on the transfer of the skills function

149. from enterprise companies to a national agency↓ (.)  
 150. .hh and the Cabinet Secretary chose to tell that  
 151. to the committee (.) this↓ morning↓ (.)  
 152. and now is refusing to answer↓ (.) whether or not  
 153. that decision (.) which she has announced  
 154. to the committee this morning↓ (.)  
 155. .hh was based on a consultation↓ (.)

In extract 10.1, JP asks the minister whether she will publish a particular set of consultation responses. Following the minister's evasive answer to that question (see analysis in section 7.3.2), extracts 10.2 to 10.9 show a variety of ways in which JP legitimates pursuing an answer over eight subsequent turns. The first way is through providing a report of what the minister had said in relation to the consultation responses. In extract 10.2, the formulation of what the minister said is introduced through 'you did say' (line 17). The use of 'did' (line 17) serves to establish that the minister made a particular statement (that consultation responses were in favour of a national skills agency) as an undisputable fact, while the use of 'quite clearly' (line 17) constructs this interpretation of the minister's statement as unambiguous. Similarly, in extract 10.7, JP reports the minister's statement through 'you said↓ the consultation responses were in favour' (lines 116-117). In extracts 10.3, 10.4, and 10.6, the formulation of what the minister said is accomplished through 'you told the committee' (lines 40, 84, and 100), followed by a statement regarding the existence of consultation responses (extract 10.3, line 41) and the favourableness of these responses to a particular initiative (extracts 10.4 and 10.6, lines 85-86 and lines 101-102). By indicating that these statements had been made towards the committee, JP makes the inference available that the other committee members can confirm the veracity of his report. Similarly, in extract 10.9, JP asserts that the minister had made 'an announcement to the committee↓' (line 145) in relation to the consultation responses.

Through providing a report of what the minister said, JP constructs his subsequent utterances as reasonable, thereby legitimating the pursuit of an answer. In extract 10.2, having reported the minister had told the committee that the consultation responses were in favour of a particular decision and constructed this interpretation of what the minister said as unambiguous, JP formulates the question as a request which

is based on the premise that the consultation responses exist: ‘I’m asking you to publish those consultation responses’ (lines 22-23). In extract 10.3, JP contrasts his report of what the minister said with his impression (constructed as ‘not picking up’, line 44) that the minister is not able to publish the responses. JP provides two different explanations for this, both of which he formulates as questions with negative consequences for the minister’s credibility. The first explanation is that the consultation responses do not exist: ‘am I right in saying that there’s actually is no consultation responses↓’ (lines 45-46). The second interpretation is that if the consultation responses exist, the minister is accountable for not publishing them. This is accomplished through an if-then formulation: ‘if there was [...] [then] why aren’t you [...] going to publish them?’ (lines 50-51). In extract 10.4, JP’s report of the minister having said that the consultation responses were in favour of a particular initiative is used as the basis for two questions, both of which are based on the premise that the consultation was undertaken. The first question asks the minister to provide details in relation to the consultation: ‘now what was the consultation’ (line 89). The second question is ‘will you publish the consultation responses?’ (line 90). In extract 10.6, JP sets up a contrast between ‘you just told the committee this morning↓’ (line 100) and ‘now you’ve just said’ (line 104). JP constructs ‘the consultation responses [...] were in favour’ (lines 101-102) as meaning that the consultation was undertaken by the minister’s government. This is contrasted with ‘you haven’t [...] it was a previous government’s consultation’ (lines 104-105). In extract 10.9, JP establishes a contrast between two of the minister’s actions, namely making ‘an announcement to the committee↓ [...] this↓ morning↓’ (lines 145-151) and ‘now is refusing to answer↓’ (line 152). This contrast is strengthened by constructing the minister’s first action as undertaken by choice: ‘the Cabinet Secretary chose to tell that to the committee’ (lines 150-151). This implies that the minister had agency in making the statement, and that making the statement was a deliberate choice. This is further emphasised through the contrast between ‘this↓ morning↓’ (line 151) and ‘now’ (line 152), which highlights the short time frame in which the minister has changed her position from volunteering a particular piece of information to refusing to answer questions in relation to it.

Another way in which JP legitimates pursuing an answer is through varying the premise of his utterances while keeping to the same topic. In particular, JP alternates between asking if the consultations will be published (extracts 10.1, 10.2, 10.4) and casting doubt over the existence of the consultations (extracts 10.3, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7, 10.8, and 10.9). Within each of these categories, JP also provides variation. While in extract 10.1 JP constructs the question as casual through ‘I’d just [...] like to ask’ (line 1), in extract 10.2 this changes to a request: ‘I’m asking you to publish those consultation responses’ (lines 22-23). In extract 10.4, the question returns to asking for information: ‘what was the consultation and will you publish the consultation responses?’ (lines 89-90). In all three cases, JP’s utterances are based on the premise that the consultation responses exist. By contrast, in the other extracts, JP casts doubt over the existence of the consultation responses. In extracts 10.3, 10.5, and 10.8, this is accomplished through the use of questions: ‘am I right in saying that there’s actually is no consultation responses↓’ (extract 10.3, lines 45-46); ‘have you carried out↓ [...] a consultation↓’ (extract 10.5, lines 95-96); ‘did you [...] carry out [...] a >consultation<↓’ (extract 10.8, line 133). In extracts 10.6 and 10.9, casting doubt over the existence of the consultation is accomplished through setting up a contrast between two of the ministers’ statements regarding the consultation. In extract 10.6, the contrast is set up between ‘you just told the committee this morning↓’ (line 100) and ‘now you’ve just said’ (line 104). JP constructs ‘the consultation responses [...] were in favour’ (lines 101-102) as meaning that the consultation was undertaken by the minister’s government. This is contrasted with ‘you haven’t [...] it was a previous government’s consultation’ (lines 104-105). In extract 9, the contrast is established between two actions by the minister. The first action is making ‘an announcement to the committee↓’ (line 145), which is subsequently reformulated as ‘the Cabinet Secretary chose to tell that to the committee’ (lines 150-151). The reformulation implies that the minister had agency in making the announcement. This action (making an announcement), undertaken through choice, is contrasted with ‘is refusing to answer↓’ (line 152).

In reformulating the question, JP attends to the interactionally problematic nature of pursuing a response. In extract 10.4, JP attends to this through ‘I do wish to press you’ (line 83), an account of action which uses ‘I do wish’ (line 83) to



construct his question as a desire (therefore implicitly asking for permission), and ‘press you’ (line 83) which represents an acknowledgement of what he is doing. In extract 10.7, JP constructs the previous answer as inadequate by clarifying his question: ‘I asked about the local enterprise functions for skills’ (line 111). Furthermore, JP acknowledges his interruption through ‘forgive me for interrupting’ (line 113), a social nicety serving to mitigate his pursuit of an answer. In extract 10.8, JP provides a rationale for asking the question: ‘it does [...] actually impact on [...] part of [...] the consideration of this afternoon’ (lines 130-131). Furthermore, the use of ‘let me be very clear then↓’ (line 132) acknowledges that he had asked the question before, while at the same time implying that he is pursuing an answer in the interest of clarity.

Another way in which JP attends to the interactionally problematic nature of pursuing a response is by implying that he is doing so with the consent of the convenor. In extract 4, this is done by first addressing the convenor (line 82) before addressing the minister (line 83). Similarly, in extract 8, JP thanks the convenor in line 129 for allowing him to pursue the line of questioning before addressing the minister. In extract 9, JP addresses exclusively the convenor through starting his turn through ‘I’m [...] sorry [...] convenor’ (line 142) and not changing to subsequently addressing the minister. As indicated in section 7.3, addressing the convenor serves to indicate the presence of an impartial arbitrator who is able to intervene, in this case through allowing JP to ask further questions on the same topic.

By providing a report of what the minister previously said, and reformulating the question in different ways, JP legitimises pursuing the question. In doing so, JP also attends to his own accountability through the use of accounts, social niceties, rationales for asking the questions, and indicating that he has the approval of the convenor to pursue the minister for an answer.

### **7.3.2 Accounting for not answering**

Having examined the way in which JP legitimates pursuing an answer, I will next turn to the way in which the minister avoids answering JP’s questions.

*i) Accounting for not answering by removing agency*

The first way in which the minister avoids answering JP's questions is by removing agency away from herself. Consider the following extracts:

**Extract 10.1**

03:42:28-03:43:19

1. JP: I'd just (.) like to ask
2. if you will publish (.) .hh the consultation
3. responses that have been calling
4. for the local (.) .hh skills functions to be- to be removed
5. from the local enterprise companies↓
6. FH: (0.2) Well the (.) aspects of the: Scottish Enterprise u:m
7. and the Enterprise Network huh announced review .hh um (.)
8. is a responsibility of: u:m my colleague John Swinney↓=
9. =now he'll- he's making a statement this afternoon
10. in the Chamber on this subject↓
11. .hh I've (.) given you: (.) the information I can (.)
12. .hh and (.) announced just now
13. about the skills and training aspects↓
14. moving over to the national body↓
15. but I:'m not in a position to be able to
16. go into detail about the local delivery aspects↓

**Extract 10.7**

03:46:46-03:47:15

12. JP: I asked about the local enterprise functions for skills
13. FH: I [know
14. JP: [Forgive me for interrupting
15. for skills, transferring to a national agency↓ (.)
16. and you said↓ the consultation responses
17. were in favour [of that↓]
18. FH: [I think-] I think you might be-
19. what I've said to you that I cannot go into details of
20. .hh the review of the- of the Enterprise Networks↓
21. because that's subject to a statement
22. by my colleague this afternoon
23. and that's what I've said
24. .hh I cannot and will not provide you information on that,
25. I had suggested to .hh the Committee Convenor
26. that precisely because of that it might have been helpful

27. to have had .hh this session at another time,  
 28. but I'm: more than happy to- (.) to be here today (.)  
 29. to answer questions↓

### Extract 10.8

03:47:16-03:49:07

129. JP: [I'm grateful uh Convenor  
 130. because it does .hh actually impact  
 131. on I think part of u:m the consideration of this afternoon.  
 132. let me be very clear then↓ (.) have- (.)  
 133. did you (.) carry out (.) a >consultation<↓ (.)  
 134. on the >transfer< of the skills functions↓ (.)  
 135. from the local enterprise companies↓ (.)  
 136. into a national (.) agency↓  
 137. FH: (0.2) The review of the Scottish  
 138. Enterprise Networks as a Net- Network  
 139. has been carried out by my colleagues John Swinney  
 140. and Jim Mather↓ (.) and a statement of that  
 141. will be made this afternoon↓

In each of the above extracts, the minister avoids answering the question. The minister accomplishes this in three ways. The first way is by not adhering to the requirements of the question. In extracts 10.1 and 10.8, where the questions request a yes/no answer ('I'd [...] like to ask if', extract 10.1, line 1; 'did you', extract 10.8, line 133), the minister does not provide this type of answer. In extract 10.7, where JP makes an assertion, the minister constructs his utterance as a misunderstanding of what she had said by reformulating JP's report of her previous statement: 'I think you might be- what I've said to you [...] and that's what I've said' (lines 117-122). Furthermore, in each of the three extracts, the minister replaces the term 'consultation' used by JP with the term 'review'. This enables the minister to downplay JP's requirement to talk about consultations.

The second way in which the minister avoids answering is by indicating that the subject of the question falls within others' remit: 'the: [...] review [...] is a responsibility of' (extract 10.1, lines 6-8); 'that's subject to a statement by my colleague' (extract 10.7, lines 120-121); 'the review [...] has been carried out by' (extract 10.8, 137-139). Furthermore, the minister provides the names of these other individuals who are in charge of the subject, and indicates that

the answer will be provided by the named individuals shortly. In extract 10.1, the repair from the future tense ‘he’ll’ (line 9) to the present tense ‘he’s making a statement’ (line 9) serves to make the interval of time before an answer will be provided appear shorter. In extracts 10.7 and 10.8, the minister similarly indicates that the question will be answered shortly: ‘that’s subject to a statement by my colleague this afternoon’ (extract 10.7, lines 120-121); ‘a statement of that will be made this afternoon↓’ (extract 10.8, lines 140-141). In indicating that the subject of the question falls within others’ remit, naming particular individuals as being in charge, and indicating that these individuals will provide an answer shortly, the minister downplays the need for her to provide an answer.

In downplaying the need for answering the question herself, the minister attends to the possible accusation of not being willing to answer. In extracts 10.1 and 10.7, the minister accomplishes this by indicating that she is unable (rather than unwilling) to provide an answer. In extract 10.1, the minister indicates that she is unable to ‘go into detail’ (line 16) and constructs her previous answers as having provided ‘the information I can’ (line 11). The minister thereby implies that she has provided some (non-detailed) information already, and is unable to provide more. The minister substantiates this by providing a formulation of the information she has already provided. Furthermore, the minister emphasises her inability to provide further information through using ‘I:’m not in a position to be able’ (line 15) to construct herself as unable (rather than unwilling) to providing an answer. In extract 10.7, the minister provides an account for not answering: ‘I cannot go into details [...] because that’s subject to a statement by my colleague this afternoon’ (lines 118-121). The minister identifies the timing of the meeting as a barrier to providing additional information: ‘I had suggested to [...] the committee convenor that precisely because of that it might have been helpful to have had [...] this session at another time’ (lines 124-126). The minister also attends to the accusation of using an account as an excuse: ‘I cannot and will not provide you information on that’ (line 123), thereby addressing the issue of agency. Furthermore, the minister deals with inferential issues of not wanting to answer the question through ‘I’m: more than happy [...] to be here today [...] to answer questions↓’ (lines 127-128). In extract 10.8, subsequent to an

interaction in which the convenor had defended JP's right to ask questions, the minister simply focuses on others' remit in answering the question as an account for her not providing an answer.

The minister, then, avoids answering the questions by naming particular individuals as responsible for the initiative, and indicates that an answer will be provided soon. In doing so, the minister attends to her accountability in not answering the questions by constructing herself as unable (rather than unwilling) to provide details, and indicating that she has provided some (non-detailed) information already.

## *ii) Accounting for not answering by shifting the subject*

Another way in which the minister avoids answering the question is by shifting the subject. Consider the following extracts:

### **Extract 10.2**

03:43:20-03:44.21

17. JP: (.) .h Cabinet Secretary↓ (.) you did say (.) quite clearly (.)  
18. that the consultation responses (.) .h were in favour↓ (.)  
19. of a national skills agency↓ (.) .h with-  
20. and- (.) transferring the (.) local skills (.) functions↓ (.)  
21. to a national body↓ (.)  
22. .h and I'm asking you to publish  
23. those consultation responses  
24. FH: (.) .hh Well↓ (.) the- there was a- a- (.) a report produced  
25. °it's not u:m a full options appraisal° by the last government↓ (.)  
26. the last government did .hh u:m request PAYE Consulting  
27. to: (.) uh produce a cost-benefit analysis of local delivery  
28. as ov- as- as opposed to national delivery (.)  
29. .hh and it is our intention to publish that↓ (.)  
30. .hh I think one of the things that you have to be aware of  
31. is the- the cost benefits .hh would mean  
32. for example↓ if you are wanting to deliver Careers Scotland (.)  
33. .hh um in a local authority basis↓ (.) .h the cost to local authorities  
34. would be a hundred million pounds (.)  
35. as estimated, which I think (.)  
36. if you're asking local authorities to find cuts in the budgets  
37. elsewhere, (.) .hh to accommodate that (.) I think you'd find um  
38. there'd be quite a bit of resistance  
39. particularly .hh um up on that (.) uh financial (.) argument↓

### Extract 10.3

03:44:22-03:45:52

40. JP: Cabinet Secretary, you- you- you told the committee (.)  
41. that there was (.) consultation responses (.)  
42. that favoured the removal (.) of the local skills (.) functions (.)  
43. .h into a national body↓ (0.2)  
44. now I'm not picking up (.) that (.) you're in a position  
45. to publish that↑ (.) am I right in saying  
46. that there's actually is no consultation responses↓ (.)  
47. .hh to removing the local enterprise functions (.) for skills↓ (.)  
48. into a national Skills Agency↓=  
49. FH: =uh (.) I said=  
50. JP: =if there was, why- why aren't you (.)  
51. going to publish them?  
52. FH: Well↓ (.) can I say that uh this morning on radio  
53. we had Peter Hughes, Chief Executive  
54. of Scottish Engineering, (.)  
55. .hh he commented that we think it's, skills and training,  
56. can be done very well↓ somewhere like Learndirect↓ (.)  
57. .h Scotland under Careers Scotland and take it away from  
58. the day-to-day things↓ that  
59. Scottish Enterprise have to focus on↓ (.)  
60. .hh ((reading)) we've got to engage with employers, educators,  
61. schools, colleges, universities, and so on↓ (.) ((finishes reading))  
62. .hh so there has been a lot of support↓ (.) for the eh:  
63. >you know< removal of the skills and training elements (.)  
64. from Scottish Enterprise to something that uh  
65. I know that uh (.) colleagues uh will be aware (.)  
66. .h has been the subject of discussions for some time,  
67. and indeed (.) .hh I think if you looked  
68. at the manifestoes (.) .hh of all the four major parties, (.)  
69. that they all had an indication, (.) .hh that they would  
70. want to bring together (.) different agencies↓  
71. uh whether it's a full-blown agency under Labour,  
72. whether it's uh the Conservative's proposal  
73. to do I think exactly what we've done,  
74. which is Learndirect, um Careers Scotland  
75. and the Skills and Training aspects, and  
76. I think indeed yourselves, .hh you had an aspect  
77. you wouldn't have necessarily  
78. taken the skills and training,  
79. so I think three out of the four  
80. u:m parties going to election (.)  
81. .hh um had policies that were very similar to this↓

#### Extract 10.4

03:45:53-03:46:16

82. JP: Convenor (inaudible)  
83. I- I- I do wish to press you, Cabinet Secretary, (.)  
84. you- you told the committee, (.)  
85. .hh that the >consul<tation (.) >responses< (.)  
86. were in >favour< (.) of removing this function (.)  
87. into a national body↓  
88. FH: (0.2) uh [the- the-  
89. JP: [now what was the consultation  
90. and will you publish the consultation responses?]  
91. FH: [Well↓ the- the- ]  
92. the Careers Scotland consultation↓ (.)  
93. had a number of responses .hh that suggested  
94. that that would be the best .hh way forward

In each of the above extracts, the minister avoids answering particular questions through shifting the subject. The minister accomplishes this in two ways. The first way is by introducing the alternative subject as relevant to the answer: ‘one of the things that you have to be aware of’ (extract 10.2, line 30); ‘can I say that’ (extract 10.3, line 52); ‘the Careers Scotland consultation↓’ (extract 10.4, line 92).

The second way in which the minister accomplishes shifting the subject is by choosing an alternative topic of discussion that is tangentially relevant to the question. In extract 10.2, where JP requests for the consultation responses in favour of a particular policy to be published, the minister replaces the term ‘consultation’ (lines 18 and 23) with ‘report’ (line 24) and ‘cost-benefit analysis’ (line 27), thereby downplaying the need to focus the rest of her answer to the subject of consultation responses. The minister subsequently appears to orient to JP’s question through indicating in lines 27-28 that the report addressed ‘local delivery [...] as opposed to national delivery’ (the same topic as the consultation responses) and that ‘it is our intention to publish that↓’ (line 29), thereby appearing to comply with JP’s request. Having made the answer appear relevant to the question, the minister shifts the subject to the merits of the policy, a topic that is tangentially relevant to the question. In extract 10.3, where JP casts doubt over the existence of the consultation responses in favour of the policy, the minister shifts the subject to working up support for the policy. The minister accomplishes this through the upshot ‘so there has been a lot of

support↓' (line 62), thereby downplaying the need for the consultation responses to be in favour of the policy. In extract 10.4, where JP asks a two-part questions, the minister focuses her answer exclusively on the first part (asking for information about the consultation), thereby avoiding the second part (asking if the consultation responses will be published) altogether.

Having shifted the subject, the minister constructs the alternative subject as an answer. In extracts 10.2 and 10.3, the minister accomplishes this by providing details for the alternative subject. In extract 10.2, the minister provides details by summarising the findings of the cost-benefit analysis and using these to construct the consequences of not adopting the proposed policy as negative due to high costs ('a hundred million pounds', line 34). The minister substantiates this construction by working up consensus through the modifying feature 'quite a bit of resistance' (line 38) in relation to the hypothetical scenario 'if you're asking local authorities' (line 36). In extract 10.3, the minister provides details through enumerating a range of stakeholders, an individual's name, the category entitlement 'Chief Executive of Scottish Engineering' (lines 53-54), the use of a quote, and summarising the content of different political parties' manifesto on the subject of the policy. The minister uses these details to work up consensus over the merits of the policy, thereby downplaying the need to examine the consultation responses. In extract 10.4, the minister constructs the partial answer as a full answer by turning to vagueness. While identifying the consultation as 'the [...] Careers Scotland consultation↓' (line 92), the minister does not provide specific details about the consultation responses. Instead, the minister only indicates that this consultation 'had a number of responses [...] that suggested [...] that would be the best [...] way forward' (lines 93-94), which provides support for the policy without providing details on the responses itself. This serves to make her response vague and therefore difficult to challenge.

By shifting the subject while providing details for the alternative subject, then, the minister avoids answering JP's questions.

### *iii) Attending to the accusation of refusing to answer*

In this final subsection, I will examine the final exchange between JP and the minister, in which an answer is provided. Consider the following extract:



### Extract 10.9

03:49:08-03:50:33

142. JP: (0.2) I- I- I'm (.) sorry (.) Convenor (.)  
143. I'm not s:ure- I'm not sure  
144. that it is appropriate for a cabinet secretary  
145. to make an announcement to the committee↓ (.)  
146. in good↑ faith (.) about a decision  
147. that had been taken by Government (.)  
148. .hh on the transfer of the skills function  
149. from enterprise companies to a national agency↓ (.)  
150. .hh and the Cabinet Secretary chose to tell that  
151. to the committee (.) this↓ morning↓ (.)  
152. and now is refusing to answer↓ (.) whether or not  
153. that decision (.) which she has announced  
154. to the committee this morning↓ (.)  
155. .hh was based on a consultation↓ (.)  
156. FH: (.) We drew together consultatio-  
157. a variety of consultations↓ (.)  
158. .hh part of the consultations have been  
159. the work of my colleagues on the Enterprise Networks, (.)  
160. .hh part of the consultations were  
161. on the modern apprenticeship review↓ (.)  
162. carried out by the last government, (.)  
163. part of the consultation was on the Lifelong Learning Strategy  
164. refresh (.) .hh uh started by the last uh government↓ (.)  
165. .hh and also the Careers Scotland consultations↓  
166. so there'd been a number of consultations on this whole area↓ (.)  
167. .hh one >of the< things that I was given  
168. a clear uh °indication of° (.)  
169. .hh by uh those in this area↓ (.) whether it's employers, (.)  
170. whether it's from- from colleges, universities, etcetera was (.)  
171. can you just produce the Skills Strategy↓ (.)  
172. .hh we're fed up being overconsulta- con- consulted (.)  
173. .hh and we want to make sure  
174. that we have a skills strategy that can take us forward↓ (.)  
175. .hh now that uh uh I don't know  
176. how many consultations you need↓ (.)  
177. .hh but I think between the ones that have taken place  
178. .hh on the Enterprise Networks by my colleagues (.)  
179. .hh and the prior ones uh  
180. that certainly has provided us with a great deal-  
181. wealth of information (.) and consultation (.)  
182. as to the way forward↓

In the above extract, the minister attends to JP's accusation that she is refusing to answer whether or not the policy was based on a consultation. The minister attends to JP's accusation in two ways. The first way is by accounting for the existence of consultations, but providing no indication of their content. The minister begins by indicating that there were several consultations: 'we drew together consultation- a variety of consultations↓' (lines 156-157), the repair to 'a variety of consultations↓' (line 157) serving to imply that there were several consultations (rather than just one). The minister substantiates this construction through providing a list of consultations and the upshot 'so there'd been a number of consultations' (line 166).

The second way in which the minister attends to JP's accusation of refusing to answer is by undermining the need for an answer. The minister accomplishes this through constructing 'conducting consultations' as not taking action. The minister constructs consultations as excessive through 'we're fed up being overconsult[ed]' (line 172) and the use of 'just' (line 171) in 'can you just produce the Skills Strategy↓' (line 171). This construction is made persuasive through a range of devices. The use of footing in 'one >of the< things that I was given a clear uh 'indication of'' (lines 167-168) serves to attribute this negative characterisation of consultations as belonging to others. Furthermore, the use of active voicing in 'we're fed up being overconsult[ed] [...] and we want [...] a skills strategy that can take us forward↓' (lines 172-174) serves to substantiate this. Furthermore, the minister works up consensus over this construction by enumerating a range of stakeholders among those that have given this indication: 'whether it's employers, [...] whether it's [...] colleges, universities, etcetera' (lines 169-170). In constructing consultations as not taking action, then, the minister undermines the need for answering JP's questions regarding whether the policy was supported by the consultation responses.

The third way in which the minister attends to JP's accusation is by reformulating it. The minister accomplishes this through 'I don't know how many consultations you need↓' (lines 175-176), thereby implying that JP is accusing the minister of not having carried out enough consultations, rather than of not providing information on existing consultations. Having reformulated JP's accusation, the

minister undermines the reformulated version through indicating that a large number of consultations have been undertaken. The minister accomplishes this by referring to ‘the ones [the consultations] that have taken place [...] on the Enterprise Networks by my colleagues [...] and the prior ones’ (lines 177-179). Furthermore, the minister indicates that these consultations have provided a large amount of information. The minister makes this persuasive through the repair from ‘great deal’ (line 180) to ‘wealth’ (line 181), which emphasises the quantity of the information. Furthermore, the use of vagueness in ‘the way forward↓’ (line 182) can be taken to refer to the formulation of the policy, thereby making the inference available that the information provided by the consultations was used in formulating the policy.

By the end of the interaction, then, the minister changes her position from attributing responsibility for providing an answer elsewhere in extract 10.1 to providing some (vague) details in extract 10.9. However, the minister does not answer JP’s question whether the content of the consultation response supports the policy, despite his relentless pursuit for an answer.

## **7.4 Summary and discussion**

In this chapter, I have focused on instances in which ministers avoid answering questions. I began by examining an instance in which the minister answers the question, and showed that in doing so the minister addressed every aspect of the question. I subsequently focused on instances in which ministers legitimate not answering. The analysis revealed that ministers have a variety of strategies at their disposal to avoid answering, such as constructing the question as unfair, involving the convenor, and indicating that an answer will be provided at a later date. In the final analytic section, I examined an instance in which the minister is pursued for an answer after avoiding answering. The analysis of this instance reveals different ways in which the committee member is able to legitimate pursuing an answer. However, the analysis also reveals a range of ways in which the minister counters these attempts, such as removing agency from herself, shifting the subject, and attending to the accusation of refusing to answer instead of providing an answer.

The above analysis is consistent with other CA research on the way in which political figures avoid answering questions. In particular, consistent with research by Clayman and Heritage (2002) and Greatbach (1986), I have found that ministers legitimated not answering questions by placing responsibility on external circumstances, such as inappropriate time for providing an answer, the convenor's intention, or the unfairness of the question.

The analysis has important implications for the political science literature on accountability, and its focus on the identifying accountability mechanisms. The analysis indicates that simply asserting that particular accountability mechanisms (e.g. parliamentary committees) are in place does not provide any insight into whether and how these mechanisms are used in practice. Despite the existence of particular rules attached to these mechanisms (e.g. ministers having to answer questions from committee members), a wide range of accounting strategies can be used to legitimate not adhering to these rules. Indeed, as this chapter revealed, ministers resort to a wide variety of strategies to avoid answering questions. Given the role of the convenor as arbitrator, it is often difficult for committee members to pursue an answer if the minister resists answering particular questions. Furthermore, even when answers are pursued, the minister is able to shift the topic of the question or attend to the accusation of refusing to answer instead of providing an answer.

Overall then, the present chapter addressed the third research question of this study: What are the limitations of parliamentary committee questions as a mechanism for ministerial accountability? The present chapter pursued this research question by focusing on the most basic way in which ministerial accountability is accomplished in the context of parliamentary committee meetings, namely through the use of committee members' questions.

## Chapter 8. Discussion and conclusions

Over the past few decades, increased attention has been paid to the role of parliamentary committees in political accountability (Longley and Davidson, 1998). In turn, this attention has revealed the importance of parliamentary committees to the democratic process (Mattson and Strom, 1996). What is missing from the existing research on the work of parliamentary committees is an investigation into the ways in which accountability is accomplished by the members of parliamentary committees in their interactions with ministers.

This study aimed to examine political accountability within the context of ministerial accountability towards the Scottish parliamentary committees. The study focused on the interaction between committee members and ministers, particularly on how committee members confronted ministers with challenges, and ministers' attempts to undermine those challenges. In pursuing this examination I made use of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1995), a method that enabled me to analyse the conversational devices employed by committee members and ministers, and the interactional functions that these fulfil.

In this final chapter of the thesis, I will evaluate the ways in which the empirical chapters addressed the research questions outlined for the study (section 8.1.), provide a synthesis of the main findings (section 8.2), evaluate the analysis (section 8.3), and outline the way in which I have addressed the issues of generalisability and validity (section 8.4). I will then discuss the various contributions of the thesis. In particular I will focus on theoretical and methodological contributions to existing research within political science and social psychology (section 8.5); and the potential practical contributions of the thesis (section 8.6). I will end this chapter with a brief summary of the study (section 8.7).

## **8.1 Evaluation of the findings in relation to the research questions**

Overall, the present study was concerned with the following research problematic: How are parliamentary committees used as a mechanism for ministerial accountability in practice? As indicated in chapter 2, I have split this broad research focus into three more specific research questions:

1. How do committee members accomplish accountability in their interactions with ministers?
2. How are challenges formulated by committee members and responded to by ministers?
3. What are the limitations of parliamentary committee questions as a mechanism for ministerial accountability?

Each of these three research questions was addressed in two or more of the empirical chapters. In chapter 4, I mainly addressed the first research question, by examining the way in which committee members accomplished accountability through questions. The findings suggested that as well as making ministers accountable, the committee members attended to their own accountability. Therefore, even though the mechanism of accountability is there, it has to be constantly justified by the committee members to ensure smooth interactions.

In chapter 5, I followed up the findings in chapter 4 by examining the way in which challenges are formulated and responded to in the interaction between committee members and ministers. This enabled me to begin addressing the second research question by exploring the interaction between committee members and ministers in relation to challenges. The analysis revealed different ways in which accountability was brought to the fore through the interaction.

In chapter 6, I further pursued the second research question and provided initial insights into the third research question. In particular, the chapter explored challenges even more in-depth by focusing on one particular type of challenges, namely those related to ministers' accountability for taking action. The findings revealed different ways in which ministers responded to such challenges.

In chapter 7, I pursued the third research question in more depth by investigating different ways in which ministers avoided answering questions. Furthermore, I also analysed an instance in which the minister was pursued for an answer. This extended extract allowed me to explore the limitations of accountability in an instance where the ministers' accountability for answering is consistently pursued by the committee member.

## **8.2 Synthesis of the main analytic findings**

Three themes emerged through pursuing the research questions outlined for the study: the way in which committee members attend to stake and interest in formulating questions; the way in which committee members and ministers attend to (counter)challenges as interactionally problematic; and the limits of accountability in practice. I will consider each of these themes separately, although it is worth noting that they are overlapping throughout the thesis.

### **8.2.1 Attending to accountability in formulating questions**

Analysis revealed a variety of ways in which committee members attend to their own accountability in formulating questions. Committee members use questions to work up particular issues as accountable, while at the same time attending to their own accountability. In chapter 4, I showed the way in which committee members' questions made ministers accountable, while at the same time attending to matters of stake and interest through the indirectness of the questions. Furthermore, in chapter 6, the way in which questions were formulated served both the purpose of making the minister accountable for taking action, as well as attending to matters of stake and interest in asking the questions. The great care taken by committee members to make their questions appear reasonable and uninterested (as discussed in-depth in chapters 4 and 6) makes it more difficult for ministers to treat these questions as biased.

Using the minister's previous statements before formulating a question is one way in which committee members attend to matters of stake and accountability in asking questions, as I showed in chapter 4 and further examined in chapter 5. As I

showed in the analysis, the use of ministers' statements in the formulation of questions serves two purposes. The first purpose is to hold the minister accountable. As I showed in extract 4, this can be accomplished in a variety of ways, such as by establishing a contrast between what the minister said and other states of affairs or other statements related to the minister. The second purpose is to enable committee members to attend to their own accountability, especially in cases where their questions can be attended to as challenges. Indeed, in chapter 5 I also showed that using the minister's previous statements can serve the purpose of making challenges appear indirect, thereby mitigating their interactionally problematic character. Furthermore, as I showed in chapter 6, ministers' previous statements can also be used to make the minister accountable for taking action. In the final section of chapter 7, ministers' statements were also one of the ways I identified through which one committee member was able to legitimate pursuing the minister for an answer.

Another way in which committee members attend to matters of stake and accountability, as I showed in chapter 4, is by using footing to distance themselves from particular opinions. The use of footing enables committee members to make it appear that they are representing the views of others rather than only putting forward their own views.

### **8.2.2 Attending to (counter)challenges as problematic**

Another recurring theme in this study is the way in which committee members and ministers attend to the interactionally problematic nature of challenges and counterchallenges. Committee members accomplish the challenges in ways that make them indirect or softened, while at the same time making it interactionally problematic for the ministers to counter them. For example, in chapter 4 I show the way in which using ministers' previous statements can be used to undermine ministers' credibility. This is accomplished by contrasting two statements related to the minister and highlighting them as inconsistent. Furthermore, in chapter 5, I show how the committee members use grammatical features of questions to make these both challenging and indirect.

In countering committee members' challenges, ministers undermine the challenging elements of the committee members' utterances while ensuring that their



answers are interactionally smooth. The ministers accomplish this in various ways. For example, in chapter 5 I show how ministers avoid expressing disagreement, and when doing so use a variety of devices (e.g. modifying features, delays) to make these interactionally acceptable. Furthermore, in chapter 6, where I examine instances in which ministers are challenged to take action on particular issues, ministers attribute their lack of action to their inability (due to external factors) as opposed to their lack of commitment, thereby making their refusal to take action appear non-confrontational.

### **8.2.3 The limits of accountability in practice**

I use the term ‘limits of accountability’ here to refer to the fact that despite being available, mechanisms of accountability such as questions towards ministers during parliamentary committee meetings can fail to be effective in circumstances where ministers avoid answering questions. This theme came out most strongly in chapter 7, where I examined instances in which ministers attempted and (in some cases) succeeded in avoiding answering particular questions. The analysis revealed that ministers use a variety of strategies to avoid answering, such as constructing the situation as inappropriate for providing an answer, constructing input from others as essential to answering the question, constructing the question as unfair, and asking for intervention from the convenor. The difficulty of preventing ministers from avoiding answering was brought in sharp relief by considering an instance in which the question is consistently repeated and nevertheless does not yield a full answer.

Another way in which the study provided an insight into the limits of accountability was by considering instances in which ministers are challenged to take action on issues for which they had made a pre-election commitment, examined in chapter 6. In such circumstances, ministers were able to account for not taking action by emphasising their inability (as opposed to their unwillingness) to do so. In particular, ministers attributed their lack of action to external circumstances or referred to the role of others in generating the problem, while emphasising their continued motivation to take action on the issues themselves. This enabled ministers

to downplay their accountability for taking action without endangering their credibility.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the existence of particular mechanisms for accountability (e.g. parliamentary committees) is not enough. We also need to consider the way in which these mechanisms are used in practice.

### 8.3 Evaluation of the analysis

Antaki, Billig, Edwards, and Potter (2003) have identified six types of under-analysis that can be used to evaluate qualitative analyses of data. While these were developed in relation to discourse analysis, they apply equally well to conversation analysis, and have already been used to evaluate doctoral work using CA (e.g. de Kok, 2007). Therefore I will use their recommendations to evaluate my own analysis.

I will address each of the six forms of under-analysis in turn and show how my analysis has avoided these. A first type identified by Antaki *et al.* (2003) is under-analysis through summary. While summary may prepare the way for analysis, it does not by itself constitute analysis, as it fails to get to grips with the text by leaving it behind. Indeed, summary by itself only makes the content of speakers' utterances shorter and tidier through phrasing it in the analyst's words, thereby losing the detail and subtlety of the original without adding any valuable information. I have avoided this form of under-analysis by only using summaries sparingly, where absolutely essential for understanding the context of the data. Furthermore, I have never treated such summaries as analysis in itself. Instead, I have always followed summaries with in-depth analysis of the function of particular devices and the sequences of actions used by speakers.

A second type, according to Antaki *et al.* (2003), is under-analysis through taking sides, where analysts align or critically distance themselves from what is being said by the speakers, for example by selecting quotations for rhetorical effect. When doing so without careful analysis, this can lead to simplification of what is being said through a flattening of the discursive complexity speakers use to get their point across. In the case of the present analysis, I have avoided this form of under-analysis by withholding comments as to the speakers' moral entitlements or the

‘truth’ of their utterances. Instead, I have focused on examining the way in which speakers used particular devices and sequences of actions to achieve particular ends, and substantiated my conclusions with data from speakers’ own utterances.

A third type identified by Antaki *et al.* (2003) is under-analysis through over-quotation or isolated quotation. This type of under-analysis happens when the analyst is doing little more than compiling a list of quotations taken from the data, and is revealed by a low ratio of analyst’s comments to data extracts. It can also happen if the analyst is piecing together responses from different speakers. This type of under-analysis removes utterances from their discursive context. A related error is to single out single quotes and allowing them to ‘stand for themselves’ as if requiring no further comment. While this could be used as an illustration of analysis done elsewhere, by itself this does not constitute analysis. I have avoided this type of under-analysis by showing both questions and answers, providing an in-depth analysis, and providing a full context rather than isolated quotations.

A fourth form of under-analysis, as suggested by Antaki *et al.* (2003), is characterised by circularity. This type of under-analysis occurs when not sufficient care is taken to substantiate particular analytic claims. An example of this type of under-analysis was provided by Widdicombe (1995), who re-analysed a piece of data presented as evidence of a particular form of discourse and by being more explicit in her analysis, arrived at a very different set of conclusions. Another type of circularity to be avoided is treating speakers’ use of psychological terms (e.g. ‘I think’) as direct access to the person’s inner state rather than analysing these in terms of the function they fulfil within the specific context of that interaction. I avoided this type of under-analysis by substantiating my analytic claims with in-depth analysis of the data itself. Furthermore, I have not taken psychologising terms such as ‘I think’ at face value, but examined the interactional business they served.

A fifth form of under-analysis is characterised by extrapolating from one’s data to the world at large. I have avoided this type of under-analysis by withholding any quantitative statements relating to frequency in relation to the devices and sequences I identified in undertaking the analysis. I also address the issue of generalisability of my findings in section 8.3.

The sixth type identified by Antaki *et al.* (2003) is under-analysis through spotting. This type of under-analysis is characterised by mistaking recognition of the function of particular utterances for analysis. I have avoided this type of under-analysis by showing the way in which the devices I identified served particular ends, rather than simply spotting their presence in the data.

## **8.4 Issues of generalisability and validity**

I will begin by addressing the issue of validity. The notion of validity refers to the extent to which findings can be substantiated. The use of CA has allowed me to address this issue in a variety of ways. Firstly, conforming to CA procedure (ten Have, 1999), I have presented the data on which I base my analysis in raw form, directly preceding the analysis. This enables readers to check the validity of my analytic claims by finding the relevant line numbers (provided alongside analytic claims) within the data. A second way in which I have addressed the issue of validity is by using deviant cases to substantiate my analytic claims, and often to change these claims in order to accommodate the deviant cases (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). Deviant cases have sometimes also strengthened my analytic claims through showing the way in which exceptions changed the general patterns identified. In undertaking the analysis itself, I substantiated all my analytic claims through the data itself, rather than through *a priori* assumptions (Antaki *et al.*, 2003). I also checked the validity of my findings by examining these against other CA findings from other context. Finally, I used the ‘next-turn’ procedure (Wooffitt, 2005) to ensure that my analytic claims could be substantiated through the way in which they were attended by subsequent speakers.

Having addressed the issue of validity, I will now discuss the generalisability of my findings. The term ‘generalisability’ refers to the degree to which the results of a study can be extrapolated to other circumstances. CA, similarly to other qualitative methods, has often been accused of not being generalisable, due to using small samples (Hutchby, 2006). My study, using CA, has dealt with this in a number of ways.

A first way in which I addressed the issue of generalisability is by collecting data from four different parliamentary committees, rather than simply focusing on one committee. This enabled me to collect data discussing a wide range of topics, with several ministers and a range of committee members.

Another way in which I have addressed the issue of generalisability is by undertaking analysis across several extracts, rather than examining instances in isolation. This has served two purposes. The first purpose has been to identify deviant cases and consider the way in which they invalidated or substantiated my analytic claims, thereby allowing me to abstract rules and sequences that apply to a wide variety of cases. The second purpose has been to acknowledge slight variations between extracts, thereby illustrating the way in which the sequences or devices I identified could be used in different ways. For example, in chapter 4, I showed a variety of ways in which committee members could use ministers' statements. Each of these ways was shown by several extracts, thereby strengthening my analytic claims and making them easier to extrapolate to other situations.

Finally, many of the devices I have identified in my analysis have also been found in a range of other contexts. Indeed, in the concluding section of each empirical chapter I have discussed the way in which my findings are consistent with those from other CA studies, carried out within different contexts. As such, my findings are consistent with a growing body of work and can therefore be extrapolated outside the specific four committee meetings used for this particular study.

## **8.5 Theoretical and methodological contributions**

The present study is the first to undertake a detailed examination of the verbal interactions between parliamentary committee members and ministers in the context of parliamentary committee meetings. The analysis has theoretical and methodological implications for research, particularly political science and social psychology.

One strong focus of research on ministerial accountability is the way in which the adversarial nature of Parliament influences the interactions between ministers and

other members of Parliament. According to this body of work, this is because ministers know that given the party political rivalry inherent in parliamentary settings, any information they provide will ultimately be used by members of Parliament belonging to other parties to attack the ministers and the party they represent (Flinders, 2001; Judge, 1983). We might therefore assume that challenges are likely to engender particularly defensive disagreements from ministers.

The analysis in the present study therefore stands in stark contrast to the political science literature, by highlighting the indirectness of challenges and counterchallenges. In particular, the analysis highlights the extreme care taken both by committee members and ministers to establish questions and answers as reasonable and non-adversarial. This suggests that researchers examining parliamentary settings should not necessarily assume that interactions are confrontational, but instead focus more closely on the unfolding of the interaction and monitor for the upshots of utterances.

A tentative explanation for the discrepancy between my analysis and the findings of political science research is that the political science literature on ministerial accountability towards Parliament largely focuses on interactions within the Parliamentary Chamber, with only occasional mentions of the parliamentary committees. As debates within the Parliamentary Chamber are more mediatised and speakers have time to prepare and write down some of their answers, it could be that a confrontational style is more prevalent in that context. However, given the focus of the political science literature on description rather than minute analysis of the interaction between ministers and committee members, the discrepancy could also be due to a lack of attention to the detail of the interactions. Indeed, as discussed in chapter 3, CA work on broadcast news interviews, where journalists are strongly encouraged to confront their interviewees, also emphasised the extreme care taken by journalists to make their challenges more interactionally acceptable, by using changes of footing and other devices (e.g. Clayman, 1988; Clayman and Heritage, 2002a; Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, and McDonald, 2006; Atkinson and Drew, 1979). These CA findings, coming from a different institutional context, strengthen my own analysis.

Another focus of the existing political science literature is on identifying the mechanisms of accountability that are available in particular contexts. By contrast, the present study uses the context of ministerial accountability to examine how one such mechanism, questions asked during parliamentary committee meetings, is used in practice. In doing so, the study provides surprising insights. For example, as I have shown in chapter 7, there are limitations to the extent to which ministers can be made to answer questions asked by committee members. Findings such as these indicate the need to look more closely at the way in which accountability mechanisms are taken up, and their specific limitations. The use of fine-grained methods of analysis such as CA would fulfill the methodological requirements for accomplishing this, as the present study demonstrates.

The study also has important implications for social psychology. Firstly, the study demonstrates the richness of insight that can come from studying accounts using real-life data. Indeed, the multi-faceted nature of the findings stands in stark contrast to the clear-cut yet at times unsophisticated findings of experimental manipulations of accounts. The study also sets a precedent for using a social psychological perspective to investigate political phenomena such as ministerial accountability, and demonstrates that such a perspective can enrich more closely related areas of research (e.g. political science). Finally, the study is one of a small but growing number of social psychology doctoral theses that have the potential for being of practical use, as I will discuss in the next section.

## **8.6 Practical contributions**

The analysis presented in this study has important practical implications for those involved in the process of ministerial accountability (e.g. ministers, MSPs, MPs). In particular, the analysis shows that regardless of party politics, issues of stake and interest are at the very heart of interactions between committee members and ministers. Indeed, defensive reactions can at times be the result of particular formulations rather than *a priori* decisions to sabotage the process. Committee members may therefore be able to elicit a more positive reaction by reformulating the issue in less challenging ways. It is also precisely by becoming aware of the

inherently interested aspect of utterances that political activists can more effectively participate in public debates concerning the ministers' actions.

The study also has important implications for democracy in action. Whereas the political science literature asks questions designed to identify the available mechanisms based on abstract mapping of such mechanisms, my study shows the way in which questions are formulated and responded to *in situ*. Furthermore, the analysis also highlights the negotiated nature of accounting for not taking action. The insights provided by my analysis in relation to this topic can be useful in raising awareness of how ministers and other public figures can downplay their accountability for acting on particular issues. In turn, this increased awareness can be used to design ways to counter such attempts at downplaying accountability.

Finally, awareness of the present findings would provide a more level playing field between people who have first-hand experience with such interactions and those starting out within the field. Reading these findings would allow novices to political debates to find the most effective ways of putting their point of view across without having their arguments undermined through challenges to their stake and interest in relation to their utterances.

## **8.7 Conclusion**

This study uses conversation analysis to examine ministerial accountability towards the Scottish parliamentary committees. Use of CA has led to novel insights into the ways in which speakers (committee members and ministers) manage their interactions in relation to thorny issues such as challenges, stake, and interest. For instance, I have highlighted the great care taken by committee members to make their questions appear reasonable and uninterested, and by ministers to counter the challenging elements of these questions without appearing defensive. The thesis is the first to examine ministerial accountability within a parliamentary context using CA, and the findings have important theoretical, methodological, and practical implications.



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# APPENDIX

## The Jefferson Transcription System

- [ ] Square brackets mark the start and end of overlapping speech. They are aligned to mark the precise position of overlap.
- ↑↓ Vertical arrows precede marked pitch movements, over and above normal rhythms of speech. They are used for notable changes in pitch beyond those represented by stops, commas and question marks.
- Side arrows are used to draw attention to features of talk that are relevant to the current analysis.
- Underlining** Indicates emphasis; the extent of underlining within individual words locates emphasis and also indicates how heavy it is.
- CAPITALS** Mark speech that is hearably louder than surrounding speech. This is beyond the increase in volume that comes as a by-product of emphasis.
- °I know it, ° ‘Degree’ signs enclose hearably quieter speech.
- that’s r\*ight. Asterisks precede a ‘squeaky’ vocal delivery.
- (0.4) Numbers in round brackets measure pauses in seconds (in this case, 4 tenths of a second).
- (.) A micropause, hearable but too short to measure.
- ((staccato)) Additional comments from the transcriber, e.g. about features of context or delivery.
- she wa::nted Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound; the more colons, the more elongation.
- hhh Aspiration (out-breaths); proportionally as for colons.
- .hhh Inspiration (in-breaths); proportionally as for colons.
- Yeh, ‘Continuation’ marker, indicating that the speaker has not finished; marked by fall-rise or weak rising intonation, as when delivering a list.



<b>y'know?</b>	Question marks signal stronger, 'questioning' intonation, irrespective of grammar.
<b>Yeh.</b>	Full stops mark falling, stopping intonation irrespective of grammar, and not necessarily followed by a pause.
<b>bu-u-</b>	Hyphens mark a cut-off of the preceding sound.
<b>&gt;he said&lt;</b>	'Greater than' and 'lesser than' signs enclose speeded-up talk.
<b>&lt;he said&gt;</b>	Enclose slowed-down talk.
<b>solid.= =</b>	We had 'Equals' signs mark the immediate 'latching' of successive talk, whether of one or more speakers, with no interval.
<b>heh heh</b>	Voiced laughter. Can have other symbols added, such as underlinings, pitch movement, extra aspirations etc.
<b>sto(h)p I(h)t</b>	Laughter within speech is signalled by h's in round brackets.